Populist Rhetoric: Lega Nord
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This is the second of a series of briefings by Counterpoint leading up to the European Parliament elections. These briefings are designed to help those looking to build a counter-narrative to populist rhetoric in Europe – including politicians, campaigners and journalists. Our concern is that rhetoric opposing an open, tolerant Europe is gaining ground. Through these briefings we intend to redress the balance by showing what a counter-narrative could look like.

In these briefings, we will study the discourse of some of the most important parties that use this kind of rhetoric. When available, we will show what their MEPs have been saying in the European Parliament and how other politicians have responded. Our aim is to shine a light on the rhetoric of these parties, to highlight when this language has had influence, and to outline where responses and counter-strategies have been effective. In this second briefing, we focus on Lega Nord in Italy.

Outsides the European Parliament

Members of Lega Nord have courted controversy in the past for racist and xenophobic comments. In July 2013, Senator Roberto Calderoli of Lega Nord told supporters in reference to Italy’s first black cabinet minister at the time: “I love animals – bears and wolves, as is known – but when I see the pictures of [Cécile] Kyenge I cannot but think of the features of an orangutan.” Enrico Letta, then Prime Minister, condemned the comments and there were calls for Calderoli to resign.

The scandal follows a remark made at the beginning of May by Mario Borghezio, an MEP from Lega Nord, referring to the new black cabinet minister as a “housemaid” and the new coalition as a “bonga bonga government” in light of Kyenge’s inclusion in the cabinet. Enrico Letta was expelled from the Europe of Freedom and Democracy political group for the remark.

Context: Lega Nord (Northern League)

We look at the rhetoric of Lega Nord in the European Parliament. Lega Nord is an Italian party that in the past has been associated with its demands for the independence of regions in northern Italy, including Lombardy, Piedmont and the Veneto, and its anti-immigration position. Since its former leader Umberto Bossi’s resignation in the wake of a corruption scandal and its poor performance in general elections in February 2013, the party has become a relatively minor player on the political scene.

As Lega Nord looks to rebuild its support ahead of the European Parliament elections, its new party secretary, Matteo Salvini, has recently described the European Union as a “monster” that needs to be “slaughtered” and has called the Euro a “crime against humanity”. Salvini has paired up with Marine Le Pen, leader of the Front National in France in the European Parliament, in what he calls an “iron pact” for a “different Europe” that is “not based on servitude to euro and banks, ready to let us die from immigration…”

This briefing shines a light on how his MEPs have interacted with other politicians in debates in the European Parliament.
Mara Bizzotto (member state: Italy; party: Lega Nord; European Political Group: Europe of Freedom and Democracy Group):

Mr. President, in Italy there are 3,300,000 unemployed and one third of Italy’s population is at risk of poverty. For those, even here in the Parliament, who repeat over and over that the freedom of movement for workers cannot be questioned, I advise you to go meet citizens who are unemployed and to meet with entrepreneurs who, due to the financial crisis, are forced to close their businesses…

Therefore, the only thing to do is to immediately block admitting non-EU immigrants for at least two years but also, through quotas, citizens who come from Romania and Bulgaria. These guests who are not welcome, once they arrive in Italy, immediately get free health care and welfare benefits – health care and benefits that are not guaranteed even for Italian citizens.

The European Union has to address this problem before already existing social tensions don’t erupt in a very dangerous way.

Karin Kadenbach (member state: Austria; party: Social Democratic Party of Austria; European Political Group: Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats):

Perhaps I misunderstood you, but in a part of your speech you spoke of third country nationals, while mentioning Romanians and Bulgarians. That would be the first question.

Kadenbach reframes the issue as a question of investment by the EU: Romanians and Bulgarians are moving to Italy or other parts of Europe because there is not enough investment in their home countries. As a result, people from these countries move because they can’t find jobs and not because they are looking for social benefits.

By referring to “existing social tensions”, she also describes the EU as out of touch and unable to deal with people’s real concerns, which could manifest themselves through violence.

My second question: Don’t you think it is necessary that precisely those Member States that question the freedom of movement of persons should contribute more to the cohesion policy, so that in those regions where people are moving out of, we invest more and create more jobs, to help ensure that people can attain the same quality of life in those regions of Europe where they feel most at home?

My President, I spoke of Bulgarians and Romanians who are of course European citizens. But Italian citizens don’t care at all: they are looking for work and they can’t find it. And they don’t appreciate that people from far away come to take their jobs.

I’ll say this: there are too many people who are unemployed; there are elderly Italians who don’t even have the money to buy their medicine but people come from other countries and claim they should get them immediately. This is what I’ll say, this is the reality and we have to take note of this right away.
In the exchange, Bizzotto employs a common populist strategy, portraying herself as a representative of the interests of ordinary people – she “advises” the Parliament, for instance, to go and meet unemployed Italians. This is a direct challenge to the other politicians’ characters, implying that they are divorced from ordinary life. She should be called out on it. This speech would have been a good opportunity for another Italian politician to turn the tables and argue that they have spoken to many unemployed constituents and that these citizens are not consumed with concern about incoming Romanians and Bulgarians – they’re more worried about the shortage of jobs and the fundamental roots of the unemployment crisis. It is Bizzotto who is out of touch.

Bizzotto implies that Lega Nord is one of the only parties standing between the European elite and the “dangerous” eruption of social tensions as a result of immigration during the economic crisis. Other populists in Europe have made similar claims, arguing that if they are not heeded then something nastier and more extreme will take their place. A simple response is that parties like Lega Nord stoke rather than contain social tensions – take, for instance, the examples of rhetoric used by Lega Nord politicians Mario Borghezio and Roberto Calderoli in the “Outside the European Parliament” section.

References:


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