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Since assuming office in September of 2022, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and her party, the Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia: FdI), has emerged as the face of Italy's far right, with its junior coalition partner, the Lega ("League," headed by Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini: b. 1973), seemingly falling from relevance.¹ Meloni's staunch support for Ukraine against the Russian invasion, along with her ability to form ties with European centrists and liberal conservatives, has helped legitimize the FdI-led government abroad, while her hegemonic position over the Italian right at home has kept members of the ruling center-right coalition in check.² This latter point is made evident by the disagreements over immigration and how to approach Russia that have caused tensions within the government.³ In particular, after Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Salvini was forced to rescind his laudatory statements about Russian President Vladimir Putin, while

¹ Domestically, a similar picture is observable. At the peak of its popularity, the Lega was the party of choice of 37% of Italians. As of June 2025, the party had dropped to 8%, trailing behind FdI, which came in at 30%, and tied with the liberal conservative Forza Italia for fourth place. See "Politico Poll of Polls—Italian Polls, Trends and Election News for Italy," *Politico Europe*, February 17, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/italy/>.

² Nathalie Tocci, "Why Europe's Far Right Can't Be Tamed," *Foreign Affairs*, March 26, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/europe/why-europes-far-right-cant-be-tamed>; Riccardo Alcaro and Nathalie Tocci, "The Janus Face of Italy's Far Right," International Institute for Strategic Studies (London), September 27, 2024, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/survival-online/2024/09/the-janus-face-of-italys-far-right/>.

³ Claudio Cerasa, "Come Meloni ha rottamato il salvinismo sui migranti," *Il Foglio* (Rome), April 14, 2025, <https://www.ilfoglio.it/politica/2025/04/14/news/come-meloni-ha-rottamato-il-salvinismo-sui-migranti-7615262/>; Erik Piccoli, "Only the Pragmatic Survive: The Meloni Government's Struggle with Migration," Illiberalism Studies Program, Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, The George Washington University, September 19, 2023, <https://www.illiberalism.org/only-the-pragmatic-survive-the-meloni-governments-struggle-with-migration/>; Antonio Frascilla, "Ucraina, scontro nel governo: la Lega attacca Meloni sui sistema di difesa dati a Kiev. Crippa: 'I missili sono armi difensive?' " *La Repubblica*, July 12, 2024, sec. Politica, https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2024/07/12/news/lega_contro_meloni_armi_ucraina-423392902/; Joseph Cerrone and Erik Piccoli, "Navigating the Italian Far Right's Geopolitical Discourse," Illiberalism Studies Program, Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, The George Washington University, March 26, 2025, <https://www.illiberalism.org/navigating-the-italian-far-rights-geopolitical-discourse/>.

his comments upholding the validity of Russia's 2024 presidential election unleashed a wave of criticism from within both the Lega and allied parties.⁴

These examples give the impression that Lega's radicalism in certain areas has been tempered by its coalition partners, yet recent statements issued by the party leader and its managers showcase how *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. At the so-called "Victory Festival" held on June 9, 2025, which celebrated the first anniversary of the French far right's success in the European Parliamentary elections of 2024, Salvini gave a speech to a multinational crowd of supporters highlighting how little his positions had changed:

For our children the danger does not come from the east, it doesn't come from improbable Soviet tanks but instead comes from the south. For our children the threat is the invasion of clandestine [immigrants], predominantly Muslims, financed and organized in the silence of Brussels.⁵

What Salvini's speech illustrates is that, while he is no longer the spiritual leader of Italy's far right and his party trails behind Meloni's ever-dominant FdI, neither he nor his fellow Lega politicians have lost their radical core that set them apart from the rest of the Italian mainstream right. Yet the question remains, what has pushed the Lega towards these extreme positions? While analysis exists that traces the party's ideology and policy changes over time, comparatively less scholarly attention has focused on the extremist actors within, or adjacent to, the party that tried to push it towards further fringe positions.⁶ Therefore, this article uncovers a cluster of actors who have sought to radicalize the Lega and empirically proves, using expert coded data showcasing, how *the Lega has become Italy's most far-right mainstream party since the 2000s*.

Hijacking the Lega: A Vessel for Evolians, Duginists, and Identitarians?

⁴ It is worth noting that *il Capitano*, as he is known amongst Lega voters, has never given his full support to the Ukrainian cause and criticizes the shipment of arms to Kyiv. See Federica Pascale, "Salvini under Pressure to Show Cancelled Deal with Putin's Party after Navalny Remarks," Euractiv (news site), February 21, 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/salvini-under-pressure-to-show-cancelled-deal-with-putins-party-after-navalny-remarks/>; Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata, "Meloni Plays Down Importance of Salvini's Russia comments–Politics," ANSA English, March 20, 2024, https://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2024/03/20/meloni-plays-down-importance-of-salvinis-russia-comments_16fae2f1-0cbb-408d-b77d-31f9c8ec1e03.html.

⁵ Pupia News, "Salvini - FÊTE DE LA VICTOIRE - 1ER ANNIVERSAIRE DE LA VAGUE PATRIOTE AUX... (09.06.25)" YouTube, June 9, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1tU2Svm6xxQ>.

⁶ For more on this ideological evolution, see Piero Ignazi, "Legitimation and Evolution on the Italian Right Wing: Social and Ideological Repositioning of Alleanza Nazionale and the Lega Nord," in "The South European Right in the 21st Century: Italy, France, and Spain," ed. Jocelyn A. J. Evans, special issue, *South European Society and Politics* 10, no. 2 (June 2005): 333–349, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608740500135058>; Benito Giordano, "The Politics of the Northern League and Italy's Changing Attitude towards Europe," *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 5, no. 1 (2004): 61–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15705850408438879>; Paola Mattei and Giorgia Bulli, "Educational Policy Agenda, Ideological Transformation and Radical Right Populism: The Case of the Education-Identity Nexus of the Northern League in Italy, 1994–2018," in "Far-Right Parties and Educational Policy in Contemporary European Democracies," eds. Anja Giudici, Oliver Gruber, Philipp Schnell, and Anna Pulter, special issue, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 33, no. 1 (March 2025): 15–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2023.2212598>; Samuel Landino, "The Giant under Salvini's Feet: An Analysis of La Lega," *Yale Undergraduate Research Journal* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2020), <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/yurj/vol1/iss1/45>.

Identifying a specific and consistent ideological core that informs Lega's political platform is difficult, since the party has evolved considerably in its over 40-year history. While an overview of the party's evolution is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note the malleability of Lega's political platform, as characterized by its transition from northern regionalism to nativist nationalism along with the replacement of elites in Rome, with those in Brussels as the enemy in party discourse.⁷

However, what previous studies of the party's language and the infighting between regionalists and far-right populists do not capture is the presence of a cluster of influential actors who, drawing on the ideas of neofascist thinkers and current grassroots movements, have attempted to push the party in a direction that better reflects their beliefs. Adopting an actor-based case study approach, this article analyzes three Lega members, Mario Borghezio, Gianluca Savoini, and Roberto Vannacci, and one "fellow traveler" with ties within the party, Roberto Lavarini, to make the case that through them, hardline beliefs were introduced into the party. Specifically, for Borghezio and Savoini, the construct "Evola-Thiriartian" was created by the author to define their particular ideological tradition since both Borghezio and Savoini had worked for the journal *Orion* which, as will be discussed subsequently, drew from the works of Italian neofascist ideologue Julius Evola and the Belgian extremist geopolitician Jean-François Thiriart.⁸ Lavarini and Vannacci are also afforded the same degree of scrutiny by dissecting the particular ideological lineage which informs their positions. Each actor is analyzed here by mapping their liaisons and which specific ideas they have helped to introduce.

Mario Borghezio, Orion, and the Lega Early Years

On July 11, 1976, Mario Borghezio (b. 1947), then a young militant active in the neofascist groups Ordine Nuovo and Jeune Europe, was arrested while carrying a letter calling for the murder of magistrate Luciano Violante, who at the time was investigating far-right organizations.⁹ The contents of the letter referenced the death of another magistrate killed by far-right terrorists, an event from which Borghezio was ultimately cleared of any involvement in. However, during the investigation into Borghezio's background, a Nazi uniform decorated with an iron cross medal and false documents

⁷ Gianluca Passarelli and Dario Tuorto, "From the Lega Nord to Salvini's League: Changing Everything to Change Nothing?" in "The Origins of the Crisis: Italian Political Cultures and European Integration in the 1980s," special issue, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 27, no. 3 (June 2022): 400–415, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2022.2044649>; Daniele Albertazzi, Arianna Giovannini, and Antonella Seddone, "'No Regionalism Please, We Are Leghisti!' The Transformation of the Italian Lega Nord under the Leadership of Matteo Salvini," *Regional & Federal Studies* 28, no. 5 (December 2018): 645–671, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2018.1512977>. While Brussels has ostensibly replaced Rome, social media discourse rarely discusses the European Union, choosing to focus more on immigration.

⁸ This concept is used to differentiate them from other radical Lega members but should not be understood as a totalizing descriptor, that is to say Evola and Thiriart were the only ideologues who influenced these actors. Furthermore, one must note that Evola and Thiriart were influenced by National Socialism. Evola had served as a member of the Sicherheitsdienst, the intelligence agency of the Schutzstaffel, whereas Thiriart was a member of the Belgian collaborationist Les Amis du grand Reich Allemand. Still, both expanded their ideas subsequently throughout their career. See Andrea Scarabelli, *Vita avventurosa di Julius Evola* (Milan: Bietti, 2024), p. 414–420; "The Struggle of Jean Thiriart," *Eurasia* (magazine), February 23, 2012, <https://www.eurasia-rivista.com/the-struggle-of-jean-thiriart/>.

⁹ Andrea Mammone, "On the Historical Evolution of the Northern League in Italy," *Segle XX: Revista Catalana d'història*, no. 16 (2023): 228–246, <https://doi.org/10.1344/segleXX2023.16.11>.

were discovered to be in his possession.¹⁰ This episode in Borghezio's youth illustrates the nature of his extremist roots from which his future beliefs emerged.

During the mid-1980s, Borghezio started collaborating with a small group of neofascist activists who worked for the journal *Orion*, and he went on to become the editor of its supplemental publication *Orion-Finanza*.¹¹ Under the stewardship of neofascist terrorist Maurizio Murelli, the journal served as a reference point for militants from syncretic far-right organizations.¹² Murelli was charged with and imprisoned for killing police officer Antonio Marino with a hand grenade during a protest held in Milan on April 12, 1973.¹³ Following the suggestions of Murelli, Borghezio started associating with autonomist groups in the Piedmont region along with *Orion* collaborator Gianluca Savoini (b. 1963), a key actor who is discussed in the following section.¹⁴

This penetration of proto-Lega organizations, and subsequently into the Lega itself, was not an unrelated phenomenon. In fact, as Murelli himself would state, "we invited our readers in Lombardy to get close to the Lega, contributing to a deeper exploration of its ethnocentric worldview."¹⁵ Future Lega members who heeded this call included Alberto Sciandra, later a municipal councilor and provincial secretary from 1992 to 1998; Guido Rossi, a representative in the Chamber of Deputies from 2000 to 2006; and Francesco Littera, founder of the first Lega chapter in Cuneo, although the full extent of this penetration remains unknown.¹⁶ *Orion* contributor Marco Battarra was one of the first few to establish the autonomist group Lega Lombarda. However, he was asked to leave once his extremist positions were uncovered.¹⁷

Here it is worth discussing the components of *Orion's* core ideology. The group was inspired primarily by the traditionalist and Eurasianist schools of thought, namely by individuals such as Julius Evola, Jean-François Thiriart, and later Aleksandr Dugin, the neo-Eurasianist ideologue. Evola, the ideological north star of neofascism, represents the central reference point for Murelli and the members of the now defunct *Orion*.¹⁸ As for Thiriart, the Belgian writer articulated an anti-Atlanticist

¹⁰ "L'arresto di Mario Borghezio al confine italo-francese," Spazio70, archived clips of original articles dating from July 11 and 12, 1976, <https://spazio70.com/anni-70/msi-ordine-nuovo-e-avanguardia-nazionale/larresto-di-mario-borghezio-al-confine-italo-francese/>.

¹¹ Davide Maria De Luca, "L'estremista," *Il Post* (news site), December 10, 2018, <https://www.ilpost.it/2018/12/10/matteo-salvini-fascismo-estrema-destra/>; Mattia Luca Andriola, "Orion tra antimondialismo e revisionismo," Osservatorio Globalizzazione (website), August 19, 2019, <https://osservatorioglobalizzazione.it/osservatorio/orion-tra-antimondialismo-e-revisionismo/>.

¹² For example, both Gabriele Adinolfi, founder of the far-right organization Terza Posizione; Aleksandr Dugin, a neo-Eurasianist ideologue tied to national-Bolshevik activists; and Claudio Mutti, a former member of the neofascist pan-European group Jeune Europe and current editor of the magazine *Eurasia*; wrote for the journal. See Aleksandr Dugin, "La Russia, l'Europa, il Mondo," *Orion* (magazine), March 1992, no. 90; Gabriele Adinolfi, "Facciamo l'Europa: nazionale, imperiale, rivoluzionaria," *Orion* (magazine), April 2003, no. 223. By syncretic I mean that left-wing economic policies are paired with a general far-right orientation.

¹³ Mirco Dondi, *L'eco del boato: Storia della strategia della tensione 1965-1974* (Bari-Roma: Editori Laterza, 2023), p. 309.

¹⁴ "Chi è Gianluca Savoini," *Il Post* (news site), July 11, 2019, <https://www.ilpost.it/2019/07/11/gianluca-savoini/>.

¹⁵ Matteo Luca Andriola, *La nuova destra in Europa: Il populismo e il pensiero di Alain de Benoist* (Milan: PaginaUno, 2019), p. 147.

¹⁶ Andriola, *La nuova destra in Europa*, p. 147.

¹⁷ Claudio Gatti, *I demoni di Salvini: I Postnazisti nella Lega* (Milan: Chiarelettere, 2019), p. 43-47.

¹⁸ For more on Evola, see Franco Ferraresi, "Julius Evola: Tradition, Reaction, and the Radical Right," *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 28, no. 1 (1987): 107-151, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975600005415>; Gatti, *I demoni di Salvini*, p. 54, 63.

geopolitical vision that proposed a single united nation that encompassed Europe and most of Eurasia from “Dublin to Vladivostok,” key themes echoed in *Orion*’s publications.¹⁹ Ties between the members of *Orion* and Thiriart predate the creation of publication. Claudio Mutti (a traditionalist editor and close collaborator with *Orion*) and Borghezio were both former members of Thiriart’s organization Jeune Europe (Young Europe), with the latter joining as a highschooler in 1962 and remaining a member for “five or six years.”²⁰ So strong was the relationship between the members of *Orion* and Thiriart that the Belgian was accompanied to Russia by staff of the Italian journal, namely Battarra, when he visited Eurasianist ideologue Aleksandr Dugin, who represents the latest source of inspiration for the group.²¹

As for Dugin himself, his understanding of Evola’s traditionalism and neo-Eurasian politics coincided with those professed by the *Orion* clique, making him a natural bedfellow.²² In practice, this collection of influences translated into an anti-American and pro-Russian geopolitical vision informed by a desire to unite the peoples of Europe and Russia under a single political body.²³ Thus, the infiltration of proto-Lega organizations by individuals close to the members of *Orion*, or at least ideologically drawn to their publications, was a non-negligible development during the ideologically malleable early years of the Lega’s existence.

¹⁹ Jean Thiriart, *L’empire euro-soviétique de Vladivostok à Dublin* (Nantes: Éditions Ars Magna: 2018).

²⁰ Nicola Rao, *La fiamma e la celtica* (Milan: Akribia, 2009) p. 114; Gabriele Adinolfi, “UAEEI 2017 — Mario Borghezio — De mon engagement chez Jean Thiriart,” YouTube, August 23, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBXEjY9l1_A.

²¹ Thiriart, during this meeting, had participated in a roundtable discussion with Russian writer Aleksandr Prokhanov, Communist Party of the Russian Federation co-founder Yegor Ligachev, Russian Islamist activist Geydar Džemal, and Shamil Sultanov, the president of a small think tank called the Russia Islamic World Strategic Center. During this visit, *Orion* representative Carlo Terracciano had allegedly also given a lecture on geopolitics at the Azerbaijani Embassy in Moscow thanks to Džemal’s ties with its staff. See “The Struggle of Jean Thiriart,” *Eurasia: Rivista di studi geopolitici*, February 23, 2012, <https://www.eurasia-rivista.com/the-struggle-of-jean-thiriart/>; “Genesi e Transiti,” Orion Libri, Facebook, June 7, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/profile/100054000351104/search/?q=Mutti>. It is also worth noting that Dugin remains a supporter of Thiriart’s geopolitical vision for Europe. As recently as September 6, 2025, Dugin wrote, “Our struggle today is the Common Struggle in which the nations of the continent are called to accomplish a single unified anti-colonial Revolution, the prophet and herald of which was and remains JEAN THIRIART, the last true European, whose destiny and struggle anticipated Another Age, the Era of Empire on the other side of Cosmic Midnight, in the Eurasian TOMORROW.” See Alexander Dugin, “Twilight of the Heroes: Remembering Jean Thiriart,” *Arktos Journal, Substack* (blog), September, 6, 2025, <https://www.arktosjournal.com/p/twilight-of-the-heroes-remembering>.

²² Marlène Laruelle, “Aleksandr Dugin: A Russian Version of the European Radical Right?” Kennan Institute Occasional Papers Series, no. 294, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, July 7, 2011, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/aleksandr-dugin-russian-version-the-european-radical-right-2006>. It is worth noting that Dugin’s Eurasianism is grounded at least in part in his far-right beliefs and does not exclusively stem from the theories of classical Eurasianists such as Prince Nikolai Trubetzkoy. Notably, Dugin has remarked that SS Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich was a “convinced Eurasian” and consequently a predecessor to his own movement. See Andreas Umland, “Alexander Dugin and Moscow’s New Right Radical Intellectual Circles at the Start of Putin’s Third Presidential Term 2012–2013: The Anti-Orange Committee, The Izborsky Club and the Florian Geyer Club in Their Political Context,” *Europolity* 10, no. 2 (2016), p. 24.

²³ Gatti, *I demoni di Salvini*, p. 96–97.

As for Borghezio, in April of 1987 he would help create the autonomist political movement Lega Piemonte, serving as its president.²⁴ Shortly thereafter, Borghezio's movement would merge in 1989 with the other regional Leagues to form a single party headed by Lega Lombarda leader Umberto Bossi: the Lega Nord.²⁵

Borghezio's real political career would begin in earnest when he was elected on June 5, 1990, as a local representative for the city of Turin.²⁶ His role within the party would only increase in significance when, in May of 1994, after being elected as a member of Italy's lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, Borghezio was assigned the title Undersecretary of State for Justice in the First Berlusconi Government.²⁷ After eight years as a representative in Italy, Borghezio would spend the rest of his political career in the European Parliament from June 14, 2001 to July 1, 2019.²⁸ Over the course of his four consecutive Euro parliamentary terms in Brussels, the Lega Nord representative's career was marred by a series of controversies including his expulsion from the Euroskeptic former EU parliamentary group Europe of Freedom and Democracy following racist comments he made about Cécile Kyenge, a Congolese-born Italian politician serving as Minister for Integration, and statements blaming Norway's multiracial society for the killing spree committed by far-right extremist Anders Breivik on July 22, 2011.²⁹

Borghezio's ties to neofascist actors and organizations would continue during his time in the European Parliament (2001–2019) as he collaborated with figures such as British National Party Chairman Nick Griffin, Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands leader Udo Voigt, and former French Front National President Jean-Marie Le Pen.³⁰ In fact, so strong was the relationship between Borghezio and Le Pen that the latter referred to him as “a personal friend.”³¹ During this period in the European Parliament, Borghezio would cross paths with Salvini, who also served as a representative in Brussels from 2004 to 2006 and 2009 to 2018. The nature of their relationship remains unclear. While both were representing the Lega in Brussels, the extent to which they interacted is not well documented. However, it is important to note that under Salvini the decision was made not to list

²⁴ Online Editors, “Addio al cantautore e politico piemontese Gipo Farassino, lo chansonnier caro a Bossi,” *Corriere della Sera*, December 11, 2013, http://www.corriere.it/politica/13_dicembre_11/addio-cantautore-politico-piemontese-gipo-farassino-chansonnier-caro-bossi-ed370e54-624a-11e3-a809-0fcd5f7d9ac.shtml.

²⁵ Benito Giordano, “The Contrasting Geographies of ‘Padania’: The Case of the Lega Nord in Northern Italy,” *Area* 33, no. 1 (March 2001): 27–37, <https://rgs-ibg.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1475-4762.00005>.

²⁶ “Mario Borghezio,” *Anagrafe degli Amministratori Locali e Regionali*, n.d., <https://amministratori.interno.gov.it/index.php?page=InfoAnagrafica&IdAnagrafica=883084>.

²⁷ “BORGHEZIO Mario,” *La Camera dei Deputati*, n.d., <https://legislature.camera.it/chiosco.asp?content=deputati/legislatureprecedenti/leg12/framedeputato.asp?Deputato=d32430&position=XII%20Legislatura%20/%20I%20gruppi%20parlamentari>.

²⁸ “Mario BORGHEZIO,” 5th Parliamentary Term, *European Parliament*, 2001–2004, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/21817/MARIO_BORGHEZIO/history/5.

²⁹ Toby Vogel, “Eurosceptic Group Expels Italian MEP over Racist Comments,” *Politico Europe*, June 3, 2013, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eurosceptic-group-expels-italian-mep-over-racist-comments/>.

³⁰ Ellen Rivera and Masha P. Davis, “Different Shades of Black: The Anatomy of the Far Right in the European Parliament,” IERES Occasional Papers, Transnational History of the Far Right Series, no. 2, Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, The George Washington University, May 15, 2019, <https://www.illiberalism.org/different-shades-of-black-the-anatomy-of-the-far-right-in-the-european-parliament/>.

³¹ Alessandro Braga, *Verdennero: Presente e futuro della Lega* (Milan: Prospero, 2025), p. 109.

Borghezio as a candidate in 2019 for another term in the European Parliament, much to the latter's dismay.³²

Outside of the EU, Borghezio's ties to neofascist activists included established politicians such as Roberto Fiore, leader of the neofascist party Forza Nuova; and organizations such as the neofascist movement CasaPound, which helped get out the vote for Borghezio during the 2014 EU elections.³³ Among the neofascists with whom Borghezio associated were those involved in the episodes that marked the Years of Lead, such as the former leader of Avanguardia Nazionale, Stefano delle Chiaie; Terza Posizione co-founder Gabriele Adinolfi, and Avanguardia Nazionale member Bruno Di Luia.³⁴ Abroad, Borghezio formed ties with members of the French identitarian group Bloc Identitaire, and on November 9, 2011, he spoke at the group's chapter in Nice, "offering his services" as an EU representative to the group.³⁵



Borghezio (standing) speaking at an Avanguardia Nazionale event next to Delle Chiaie (red shirt). Displayed is the Odal Run, used by the Waffen SS. Source: Il Duce B. M. on YouTube

What this brief descriptive section has illustrated is that Borghezio's connections to the wider neofascist universe helped cement within the Lega a link between the party and extremist organizations. While the current would grow to include figures with ambitions other than his own, Borghezio would remain a quasi-north star for the ultra-right within the Lega, helping to channel an extreme doctrine to the party's leaders.

The Savoini Network: Neo-Eurasianism and Pro-Putinism

Lega's ties to the Kremlin and the ruling United Russia party are well documented.³⁶ Under Salvini's stewardship, an agreement was signed in 2017 to "cooperate and collaborate" with United Russia, to

³² "Lega, la delusione di Borghezio escluso dalle europee: 'È un errore politico, non capisco la scelta di Salvini,'" *La Repubblica*, April 15, 2019,

https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2019/04/15/news/lega_europee_mario_borghezio_liste-224130738/.

³³ Chiara Piselli, "Matteo Salvini e CasaPound, un rapporto lungo cinque anni," Open (website), May 2, 2019, <https://www.open.online/2019/05/02/matteo-salvini-e-casapound-un-rapporto-lungo-cinque-anni/>; For more on Forza Nuova and CasaPound, see Matteo Albanese, "CasaPound Italia and Forza Nuova: Back to the Future," in *Rethinking Fascism: The Italian and German Dictatorships*, eds. Andrea Di Michele and Filippo Focardi (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022): 317–334, <https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110768619-016/html>.

³⁴ Patrizia De Rubertis, "Neofascismo, Borghezio a Delle Chiaie: 'Comandante, serve rivoluzione nazionale,'" *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, June 26, 2014, <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2014/06/26/neofascismo-borghezio-a-delle-chiaie-comandante-serve-rivoluzione-nazionale/286145/>. For more on the Years of Lead, the period of extremist violence that occurred in Italy during the Cold War, and the neofascist organizations and actors involved, see Erik Piccoli, "Italian Neofascism and Global Networks: A Transnational Perspective on the Strategy of Tension," IERES Occasional Papers, no. 31, Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, The George Washington University, <https://www.illiberalism.org/italian-neofascism-and-global-networks-a-transnational-perspective-on-the-strategy-of-tension/>.

³⁵ Daniele Sensi, "Borghezio aiuta i neonazisti," *L'Espresso*, September 12, 2011, <https://lespresso.it/c/-/2011/9/13/borghezio-aiuta-i-neonazisti/32824>.

³⁶ Andrey Makarychev and George Spencer Terry, "An Estranged 'Marriage of Convenience': Salvini, Putin, and the Intricacies of Italian-Russian Relations," *Contemporary Italian Politics* 12, no. 1 (March, 2020): 23–42,

include interaction between the youth groups from both parties, and Putin was regularly the subject of praise in the Lega leaders' speeches.³⁷ Among the major pro-Russian activists within the Lega was the aforementioned Gianluca Savoini, co-founder of the Lombardy-Russia Cultural Association (LRCA) and former spokesman for Salvini.³⁸

Savoini traces his political origins to the group of activists close to *Orion*, with Battarra stating that Savoini would frequent his bookstore.³⁹ While Savoini would downplay his ties to the publication, and to Murelli in particular, it is known that he had traveled on multiple occasions to Moscow to deliver copies of *Orion* to Dugin.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Savoini was among the other members close to *Orion* who joined the Lega, following Murelli's belief that the autonomist party was "fertile ground" in which their political ideas could grow.⁴¹ Among the first responsibilities Savoini undertook within the party was that of an editor for the Lega's newspaper *La Padania*.⁴² According to statements made by his colleagues, Savoini displayed neo-Nazi symbols and an image of Hitler on his desk, provoking concern among the staff.⁴³ However, these practices did not stop Salvini, then a journalist for *La Padania*, from forming a close bond with Savoini.⁴⁴ In fact, Savoini would experience a meteoric rise within the Lega with the apogee of his success being his promotion to spokesman for Salvini after the latter was confirmed as party leader in 2013.

While Savoini's political agenda was multifaceted, his attempts to reshape the Lega were informed primarily by his pro-Putin sentiments. His vehicle for promoting a pro-Russian agenda within the party was the LRCA, an organization he cofounded in 2014 alongside Lega politician Max Ferrari.⁴⁵ According to the organization's description, its aims were to promote Putin's worldview of identity, sovereignty, and tradition, while conducting trade missions in Russia and occupied parts of

<https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2019.1706926>; Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir* (London: Routledge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315560991>.

³⁷ Andrea Gagliardi, "Lega-Russia Unita, cosa c'è nell'accordo di collaborazione ora rinnegato," *Il Sole 24 Ore* (Milan), April 3, 2024, <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/lega-russia-unita-cosa-c-e-nell-accordo-collaborazione-ora-rinnegato-AFC76AID>; Cecilia Biancalana, "Italy's Multiple Populisms Facing the Russo-Ukrainian War—ECPS," European Center for Populism Studies, March 4, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0022>; Ties between the Lega and Russian political parties did not begin with Salvini, as Bossi had ties with Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the leader of the far-right Liberal Democratic Party of Russia—ties that Savoini himself claimed to have facilitated. However, it was under Salvini when the party formed a relationship with the regime itself. See Gatti, *I demoni di Salvini*, p. 153.

³⁸ "Gianluca Savoini," Open (website), <https://www.open.online/temi/gianluca-savoini/>.

³⁹ Gatti, *I demoni di Salvini*, p. 128.

⁴⁰ Gatti, p. 128–129; "Genesi e Transiti," Orion Libri, Facebook, June 7, 2024.

⁴¹ Giorgio Mottola, "La fabbrica della paura," *Report*, RAI 3 (TV news channel), October 28, 2019, <https://www.raiplay.it/video/2019/10/Report-del-21102019-La-fabbrica-della-paura-825ce3a7-8573-46c8-80d2-cde1b519fd01.html>.

⁴² "Dott. Gianluca SAVOINI," SSD International Self Defense Combat (website), n.d., <https://www.internationalsdc-proflg.it/dott-gianluca-savoini/>; Padania refers to the part of northern Italy between the Po river and the Alps, the area where the Lega wanted to craft an independent state.

⁴³ "Savoini e 'la foto di Hitler sulla scrivania,'" Open (website), July 16, 2019, <https://www.open.online/2019/07/16/savoini-e-la-foto-di-hitler-sulla-scrivania/>.

⁴⁴ Sara Menafrà, "Le ombre sul rapporto tra Salvini e Savoini (e la Lega con la Russia): L'intervista a Malofeev anticipata a Open," Open (website), October 21, 2019, <https://www.open.online/2019/10/21/le-ombre-sul-rapporto-tra-salvini-e-savoini-e-la-lega-con-la-russia-report-rispolvera-un-vecchio-video-archivio-rai/>.

⁴⁵ *Il Post*, "C'è una rete di associazioni filorusse molto attiva in Italia," *Il Post* (Milan), January 11, 2024, <https://www.ilpost.it/2024/01/11/associazioni-filorusse-vento-dellest-modena/>.

Ukraine.⁴⁶ In addition to in-person meetings and events hosted at its headquarters in Milan, Savoini would provide commentaries on events relating to Russia and Putin on the organization's YouTube channel.⁴⁷ While the association was led by Savoini in his capacity as president, the role of honorary president was assigned to the Russian Alexey Komov.⁴⁸



Komov speaking at the Lega congress where Salvini was elected party leader in 2013.

Source: Lega Salvini Premier on YouTube

The decision to select Komov is noteworthy, as it underscores the ideological nature of Savoini's organization. As the Russian representative of the anti-abortion and anti-LGBT World Congress of Families (WCF) and head of the international department of the St. Basil's Foundation, Komov is a close ally of Russian businessman and monarchist Konstantin Malofeev, who has historically supported far-right organizations and party's in Europe.⁴⁹

Komov's liaisons with the Lega were

made evident during the parties 2013 Federal Congress, where he gave a speech endorsing the Italian party and calling for stronger ties with Russia.⁵⁰ Malofeev has since stated that he was supposed to speak at the event, allegedly at the request of Salvini, but could not travel, thus sending Komov in his place.⁵¹ Therefore, while Savoini's association marketed itself as a nonpartisan organization, his political background and choice of Russian collaborators illustrates its distinctly extremist character.

In addition to Komov, Savoini facilitated the integration of Dugin into Lega's network. Both men had known one another since 1992, when Dugin traveled to Milan in order to meet with his *Orion* contacts.⁵² According to Savoini, he would travel to Russia the following year to meet with Dugin again and participate in the occupation of the White House in Moscow during the 1993 constitutional crisis.⁵³ While members of the *Orion* group would continue to serve as Dugin's main contacts in Italy along with the traditionalist Claudio Mutti, Savoini would help facilitate the expansion of the Russian

⁴⁶ Alberto Nardelli, "Revealed: The Explosive Secret Recording That Shows How Russia Tried to Funnel Millions to the 'European Trump,'" BuzzFeed News, July 10, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/albertonardelli/salvini-russia-oil-deal-secret-recording>; Alessandro Braga, *Verdenaro*, p. 126.

⁴⁷ Lombardia Russia, "Putin at Valdai Discussion Club FULL SPEECH 2014," YouTube, October 28, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvZXIXIKTRnG_y38CKmy2g.

⁴⁸ Editorial team, "Nasce Lombardia-Russia, associazione per raccontare il 'vero Putin,'" *L'Indipendenza Nuova* (Albiolo), February 20, 2014, <https://www.lindipendenzanuova.com/nasce-lombardia-russia-associazione-per-raccontare-il-vero-putin/>.

⁴⁹ "Russian Representative of the American Anti-LGBTQ+ World Congress of Families Indicted by US Authorities," Global Project against Hate and Extremism (website), March 3, 2025, <https://globalextrmism.org/post/russian-representative-of-the-american-anti-lgbtq-indicted/>.

⁵⁰ Lega Salvini Premier, "CONGRESSO FEDERALE LEGA NORD 2013 - Ambasciatore Russo Nazioni Unite Alexey Komov," YouTube, December 18, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsgJtcNZZwQ>.

⁵¹ Mottola, "La fabbrica della paura."

⁵² Gatti, *I demoni di Salvini*, p. 154.

⁵³ Gatti, p. 154.

ideologue's network into mainstream Italian politics.⁵⁴ In November of 2016, Dugin interviewed Salvini in Russia, asking the Italian politician questions about American President Donald Trump, NATO, and populism, an event that appeared out of the ordinary if taken at face value.⁵⁵ However, in knowing the strong ties that existed between Dugin and Savoini, it becomes clear how this liaison emerged. In fact, according to Dugin, it was Savoini himself who had introduced him to Salvini.⁵⁶

Aside from promoting Dugin's opinions on the LRCA's website, Savoini invited the Russian ideologue on multiple occasions to speak at the organization's events in Italy and made him the honorary president of the LRCA chapter in Piedmont, underscoring Savoini's endorsement of his ideology.⁵⁷ While not organizing this particular event, Savoini was present at Dugin's lecture given on June 9, 2019 to members of the Lega's youth group, Lega Giovani. Among those introducing the ideologue was Davide Quadri, director of the youth group's foreign affairs branch, who in an interview stated that he recognized the strong ties that existed between Savoini and Dugin but denied the former's involvement in organizing the event.⁵⁸

Along with Savoini, the aforementioned Borghezio participated in the consolidation of Dugin's ties within the Lega.⁵⁹ On April 21, 2015, Borghezio launched a new organization called Lega Nazionale, which would serve as a "complementary" group to Salvini's party, with the express purpose of promoting the Lega's policies in the city of Rome and ultimately making it a national organization.⁶⁰ At the inaugural event, under the slogan "Verso una Lega Nazionale" (Towards a National Lega), alongside Borghezio were Aymeric Chauprade, French Front National MEP, and Dugin himself – indicating support from the international Right.⁶¹ Due to the work of Savoini, Borghezio, and neofascists outside the party, Dugin and his ideals were introduced to and rendered acceptable within the Lega.

⁵⁴ Giovanni Savino, "From Evola to Dugin," in *Eurasianism and the European Far Right*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015): 97–124.

⁵⁵ Katehon, "Italy, EU and Trump–Katehon Think Tank: Geopolitics & Tradition," Katehon (website), November 27, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20161127092655/https://katehon.com/article/italy-eu-and-trump>.

⁵⁶ Mottola, "La fabbrica della paura."

⁵⁷ Aleksandr Dugin, "I gruppi del potere mondialista vogliono una guerra globale," interview by Gianluca Savoini, Lombardiarussia (website), May 16, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140516072525/http://lombardiarussia.org/index.php/component/content/article/57-categoria-home-/290-i-gruppi-del-potere-mondialista-vogliono-una-guerra-globale>; Anton Shekhovtsov, "Russia and the European Far Right" (PhD diss., University College London, 2018), p. 181, <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10047343/>.

⁵⁸ Marco Billeci, "Moscopoli, a giugno nel varesotto Savoini, la Lega e Dugin si sono riuniti per convegno in castello," Fanpage (news site), August 1, 2019, <https://www.fanpage.it/politica/moscopoli-a-giugno-nel-varessotto-savoini-la-lega-e-dugin-si-sono-riuniti-per-convegno-in-castello/>.

⁵⁹ Andriola, *La nuova destra in Europa*, p. 325.

⁶⁰ This decision and its corresponding event coincide with Salvini's decision to take the party outside of the confines of northern Italy and promote his agenda throughout the Italian Peninsula. In fact, Salvini had launched a new party, Noi con Salvini (We, with Salvini), to help carry out his plans to win over part of the southern electorate.

⁶¹ Ylenia Sina, "Nel regno del Bagaglino Borghezio abbraccia Giulietto Chiesa," *RomaToday* (news site), April 22, 2015, <https://www.romatoday.it/politica/lega-nazionale-mario-borghezio-teatro-margherita.html>. Salvini sent a video message since he could not make it to the event.

In July of 2019, BuzzFeed News published an audio recording of a meeting between Savoini and three then-unnamed Russians the Metropol Hotel to discuss the prospects of illegally funding Lega in the upcoming European Parliamentary elections.⁶² Among them was Savoini, who, in the recording, can be heard stating that “a new Europe has to be close to Russia” and that “Salvini is the first man who wants to change all of Europe.”⁶³ While the investigation was archived three years later, as the transfer of funds never occurred and therefore no crime was committed, Savoini’s reputation plummeted as he ultimately became a pariah figure within the party.⁶⁴ Isolated from the Lega, Savoini continues to operate under the LRCA brand to promote Kremlin propaganda on the social media app Telegram to his audience of over 12,000 followers.⁶⁵



Dugin and Borghezio at the Verso una Lega Nazionale event in Rome on April 21, 2015.

Source: Pentamedia Comunicazione on YouTube

Baron Roberto Jonghi Lavarini and the “Third Lega”

Tracking Dugin’s network in Italy leads to another prominent actor and fellow traveler with the Lega: Baron Roberto Jonghi Lavarini (b. 1972). Nicknamed the Black Baron, Lavarini is a fixture in Milan’s far-right circles and helps animate a plethora of right-wing projects ranging from aristocratic groups to neo-Eurasian parties. Lavarini’s political activities began in the 1990s when he joined the neofascist Movimento Sociale Italiano and later its successor Alleanza Nazionale, the precursor parties to FdI. Ultimately he was expelled from Alleanza Nazionale when he celebrated his wedding by reading quotes from Benito Mussolini.⁶⁶ After a stint with the neofascist party Fiamma Tricolore, Lavarini formed his own movement called Fare Fronte, which during the 2018 national elections joined Meloni’s FdI, though the former failed to obtain any seats.⁶⁷ These initiatives only capture a fraction of the Black Baron’s wider political activities, which are summarized in Table 1:

TABLE 1. Organizations Roberto Lavarini has led, associates with, or which are represented in Italy⁶⁸

⁶² Nardelli, “Revealed.”

⁶³ Pupia News, “Lega e Russia - l’audio Di Gianluca Savoini (10.07.19),” YouTube, July 11, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fbsnpuEmdc8>.

⁶⁴ Il Fatto Quotidiano, “Inchiesta Metropol, la decisione del giudice per le indagini preliminari di Milano,” *Il Fatto Quotidiano* (Rome), sec. Giustizia, April 27, 2023, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2023/04/27/metropol-archiviata-dal-gip-di-milano-linchiesta-per-corruzione-internazionale/7143564/>.

⁶⁵ “@LombardiaRussiaGeN,” Telegram, n.d., <https://t.me/LombardiaRussiaGeN/23598>.

⁶⁶ “Roberto Jonghi Lavarini,” Open (website), n.d. <https://www.open.online/temi/roberto-jonghi-lavarini/>.

⁶⁷ “Eligendo Archivio - Ministero dell’Interno DAIT,” Eligendo (website), n.d., <https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it>; Enrico Dalcastagné, “Roberto Jonghi Lavarini, il ‘barone nero’ della destra milanese,” *Domani* (Rome), October 1, 2021, <https://www.editorialedomani.it/fatti/roberto-jonghi-lavarini-chi-è-fanpage-fratelli-ditalia-meloni-eusgdktz>.

⁶⁸ “Elezioni politiche: Non ci saranno i candidati del Movimento Sociale che lascia libertà di voto ai propri sostenitori–MSE–Movimento Sociale Eurasia,” Movimento Sociale Eurasia (website), August 9, 2022, <https://movimento-sociale-eurasia.org/index.php/2022/08/09/elezioni-politiche-non-ci-saranno-i->

Name	Description	Status
Movimento Sociale Eurasia	This cultural organization was founded in 2018 as the successor to the Movimento Sociale Europeo. Its ideology is based on the ideas of Julius Evola, Jean Thiriart, Jean-Marie Le Pen, and Aleksandr Dugin. In 2021, Lavarini served as the group's coordinator.	Active
Movimento Sociale Europeo	In 2000, former Fiamma Tricolore member Roberto Bigliardo split from the party, giving rise to the Movimento Sociale Europeo. Lavarini was a founding member of the cultural organization participating in the split.	Inactive
Destra per Milano	Co-founded by Lavarini in 2000, the political committee Destra per Milano sought to promote far-right organizations in Milan and "relaunch an authentic European right" based on the ideals of French politician Marine Le Pen. The committee disbanded voluntarily in 2013.	Inactive
Aristocrazia Europea	Lavarini co-founded and remains an active member of Aristocrazia Europea, an international cultural association that brings together aristocrats from Europe and Russia. The organization's youth wing is headed by Pietro Stramezzi, president of the cultural association Friends of Imperial Russia.	Active
World National-Conservative Movement	In September of 2015, Lavarini was selected to be a member of the World National-Conservative Movement's (WNCM) council. The WNCM was a network of over 50 European and Russian groups established by the Russian Imperial Movement and ultra-conservative pro-Putin party Rodina.	Inactive

Outside of neofascist politics, Lavarini, in part through his organization Aristocrazia Europea, has rubbed shoulders with royals such as Emanuele Filiberto of Savoy, disputed head of the House of Savoy, and Grand Duke George Mikhailovich, disputed heir to the Romanov Dynasty.⁶⁹ A self-

candidati-del-movimento-sociale-che-lascia-liberta-di-voto-ai-proprio-sostenitori/; "Provenienza e continuità storica-MSE-Movimento Sociale Eurasia," Movimento Sociale Eurasia (website), August 9, 2022, <https://movimento-sociale-eurasia.org/index.php/provenienza-e-continuita-storica/>; "Destra per Milano: Liberi e coerenti," Destra per Milano (website), <https://destrapermilano.blogspot.com/2013/09/destra-per-milano-liberi-e-coerenti.html>; Mariya Omelicheva, "Designating the Russian Imperial Movement a Terrorist Organization: A Drop in the Bucket of Needed US Counter-Extremism Responses," *PONARS Eurasia* (blog), Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, The George Washington University, June 1, 2020, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/designating-the-russian-imperial-movement-a-terrorist-organization-a-drop-in-the-bucket-of-needed-u-s-counter-extremism-responses/>; Aristocrazia Europea, "Il Barone Roberto Jonghi Lavarini ..." Facebook, September 15, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/aristocraziaeuropea/posts/pfbid02sq1QX2S55cveLno24j3CCDRaoQBNTxoS9K2xe3joKEMgTPmrq3zAwzKj2nQq7mqNl>.

⁶⁹ The extent of Lavarini's relationship with the grand duke remains uncertain. See Jacopo Iacoboni, "Tra oligarchi russi e aristocrazia nera di Milano, la rete geopolitica di George Romanov l'ultimo zar della Russia," *La Stampa*, October 9, 2021, <https://www.lastampa.it/topnews/primo-piano/2021/10/08/news/tra->

described “Catholic faithful to the tradition,” Lavarini is also tied to the Knights of Malta serving as a volunteer in the order. According to Lavarini:⁷⁰

Both my grandfathers were aristocrats, committed Catholics, active dignitaries of the Orders of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem and Malta, monarchical officers loyal to His Majesty King Umberto II and the House of Savoy. I have frequented these environments since I was a child, so it was natural for me to continue to frequent them as a boy and as an adult ... I am honored to be a part ... of the Order of the Holy Cross of Georgia.

Along with his interpretation of Catholicism, Lavarini is inspired by Dugin’s work, calling his writings “genius” and “fascinating.”⁷¹ Both men had the opportunity to meet on several occasions in Italy. One noteworthy example was a debate hosted by Maurizio Murelli on June 26, 2018, which saw Dugin pitted against author Diego Fusaro. In attendance were representatives from various groups of Italy’s far-right, including Savoini along with members of the Lega, FdI, CasaPound, and the neo-Nazi group Lealtà Azione.⁷² Lavarini’s ideology appears to be an amalgamation of various far-right tendencies that have matured over his nearly 40 years in politics. However, it is his relationship with the Lega that has garnered him national attention.

While never joining the party, Lavarini has been close to the Lega and its current leader since his youth. In fact, both Salvini and the Black Baron, according to the latter, would canvas together in Milan.⁷³ While it is unclear when their relationship started, the ever-present Borghezio is also tied to Lavarini as the latter assisted the former EU representative in setting up his magazine *Idee*.⁷⁴

Utilizing his extensive network of contacts with the far right, the Black Baron has helped Lega politicians in their election campaigns. Of note is former MEP Angelo Ciocca, for whom Jonghi claims to have mobilized 5,000 voters. In addition to Ciocca, a 2021 investigation by the news site Fanpage discovered that Lavarini was working with Lega regional councilor Max Bastoni and Borghezio to promote a “Third Lega,” that is to say, a Lega conducive to their extremist beliefs.⁷⁵ In fact, the investigation also uncovered how both Bastoni and Silvia Sardone, the party’s current vice secretary, had ties with Lealtà Azione. The ties between the Lega and Lealtà Azione were so strong that one of Lealtà Azione’s members, Stefano Pavesi, was Sardone’s staff members at the EU and a municipal

oligarchi-russi-e-aristocrazia-nera-di-milano-la-rete-geopolitica-dell-ultimo-zar-della-russia-1.40788399/; Jonghi Lavarini, “Nobiltà: Storia, cultura e tradizione,” Jonghi Lavarini: Antica famiglia Walser von Urnawas, *Blogspot*, April 16, 2016, <https://jonghi.blogspot.com/2016/04/nobilta-storia-cultura-e-tradizione.html>.

⁷⁰ “Roberto Jonghi Lavarini,” Roberto Jonghi (website), n.d., <https://www.robortojonghi.it/>.

⁷¹ Redazione, “Intervista a Roberto Jonghi Lavarini,” Agenparl (website), August 30, 2024, <https://agenparl.eu/2024/08/30/intervista-a-roborto-jonghi-lavarini-il-barone-nero-tra-imprenditoria-tradizione-e-geopolitica/>.

⁷² Fidest Press Agency, “Fronte rossonero filo russo e anti-USA,” Fidest (news site), June 25, 2018, <https://fidest.wordpress.com/2018/06/26/fronte-rossonero-filo-russo-e-anti-usa/>.

⁷³ Gianmarco Aimi, “Il filo nero che lega l’estrema destra alla guerra in Ucraina,” Men on Wheels (website), March 12, 2022, <https://mowmag.com/attualita/parla-jonghi-lavarini-la-destra-radical-e-al-90-putiniana-lega-e-fdi-traditori-e-venduti-e-su-andy-rocchelli-in-ucraina>.

⁷⁴ il reporter indignato, “BORGHEZIO LANCIA LA TERZA PAGINA DEI SOVRANISTI: IL GIORNALE CULTURALE ‘IDEE,’” YouTube, July 10, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09yay3Pnx9k>.

⁷⁵ Backstair, “An Undercover Investigation Exposes a Group of Right-Wing Extremists Influencing Italian Politics from the Shadows,” Fanpage (news site), December 10, 2021, <https://www.fanpage.it/attualita/an-undercover-investigation-exposes-a-group-of-right-wing-extremists-influencing-italian-politics-from-the-shadows/>.

candidate in Milan with the Lega.⁷⁶ With the publication of the Fanpage investigation, many Lega politicians attempted to distance themselves from the Black Baron, stating they either did not know him, or minimizing their ties.⁷⁷

Lavarini admits that the Fanpage investigation demolished his electoral prospects, rendering him untouchable among the mainstream right.⁷⁸ However, he remains politically active, in particular through his association with the Movimento Sociale Eurasia and Aristocrazia Europea. While it is clear that Lavarini's ideological background is characterized by both a neofascist and neo-Eurasianist bent, he never fully joined the Lega, making him only an outside actor whom fascist Lega activists associated with.

A Radical Revitalization? Roberto Vannacci and Remigration

With Giorgia Meloni's FdI obtaining the lion's share of votes on September 25, 2022, Salvini and the Lega were relegated to a secondary status within the far-right sphere in Italy. As the junior coalition partner, the party had to acquiesce to the FdI's policy preferences, in particular its Atlanticist foreign policy. This, coupled with the Lega's drop in the polls, has rendered it a less appealing organization for far-right activists interested in a political career. Meanwhile, figures such as Savoini and Ciocca were tainted by their respective scandals, while Borghezio, always faithful to his extremist core principles, found himself openly criticizing Salvini for having "irreparably ruined the Lega brand" by allowing "mafiosi" to infiltrate the party.⁷⁹ While the radical actors now appeared as pariahs, a new figure within the Lega was able to reposition



Vannacci in uniform.
Source: Wikicommons.

Roberto Vannacci, a special operations commander and author that *Le* "openly xenophobic polemicist," joined the Lega in the lead-up to the elections.⁸⁰ His military history is formidable as it includes:⁸¹

- Commander of Task Force "CONDOR" and Joint Special Operations Task Group – Operation Ancient Babylon 9 – Iraq (2006).

⁷⁶ Braga, *Verdenero*, p. 106.

⁷⁷ Giuseppe Scaffidi, "Chi è Roberto Jonghi Lavarini, il 'Barone Nero' dell'inchiesta di Fanpage," *Rolling Stone Italia*, October 10, 2021, <https://www.rollingstone.it/politica/chi-e-roberto-jonghi-lavarini-il-barone-nero-dellinchiesta-di-fanpage/589110/>.

⁷⁸ Redazione, "Intervista a Roberto Jonghi Lavarini," Agenparl (website), August 30, 2024, <https://agenparl.eu/2024/08/30/intervista-a-roberto-jonghi-lavarini-il-barone-nero-tra-imprenditoria-tradizione-e-geopolitica/>.

⁷⁹ Francesco Spini, "Borghezio: 'Salvini ha irrimediabilmente rovinato il marchio Lega, un partito ormai infiltrabile dalle mafie,'" *La Stampa*, April 28, 2024, https://www.lastampa.it/politica/2024/04/28/news/borghezio_salvini_rovinato_lega_mafia-14261183/.

⁸⁰ Giorgio Ghiglione, "How an Obscure General Became the Star of Italy's Far Right," *Foreign Policy*, July 1, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/05/10/italy-roberto-vannacci-far-right-meloni-eu-election/>; Allan Kava, "Italy: Roberto Vannacci, far-right's favorite general is in trouble," *LeMonde*, March 1, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/03/01/italy-roberto-vannacci-far-right-s-favorite-general-is-in-trouble_6577360_4.html.

⁸¹ "Curriculum Vitae," *Ministero Della Difesa*, n.d., https://dait.interno.gov.it/documenti/trasparenza/EUROPEE_20240609/Candidati/CI01/548293/1731150/17955_548293_1731150_roberto_vannacci_20240525_cv.pdf.

- Chief of Staff of NATO Special Forces – ISAF SOF HQ – Kabul, Afghanistan (2013-2014).
- Defense Attaché in the Russian Federation (2020-2022).

His post in Moscow, leading up to the Russian invasion, is important. Vannacci has expressed an affinity for the Russian leadership and opposed sending Italian troops to Ukraine. Indeed, the General has made comments in support of the Russian President as late as September of 2025 stating in an interview that Vladimir Putin has “has brought an explosion of well-being and wealth” to his people and that he prefers the Russian leader over Zelensky.⁸²

While most of his life was dedicated to his service in the Italian Army, it was not his military accomplishments that garnered him national attention.⁸³ In August of 2023, Vannacci self-published *The World Upside Down*, a book in which he criticizes modern society for inverting what were “normal traditional values.” Following the publication of the book, which sold 200,000 copies, in August 2023 the Meloni Government’s Army Chief of Staff Pietro Serino opened an inquiry into Vannacci over his book. A formal investigation followed in November, concluding in February of 2024. The Meloni Government’s Defense Minister, Guido Crosetto, handed him an 11-month suspension and his salary cut in half for, according to *Le Monde*, “violating military neutrality” and “damaging the Army’s reputation”.⁸⁴

With his book quickly emerging as a bestseller and his military career coming to a close, Vannacci was catapulted to stardom and resulted in various political formations seeking his endorsement. One of these was the neofascist Forza Nuova, whose leader Roberto Fiore suggested that Vannacci run for former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi’s old Chamber of Deputies seat on Fiore’s ticket.⁸⁵ While Vannacci declined, stating that he did not want his ideas to be linked to any political movement, he would change his mind a year later by joining the Lega, first as an independent politician on the Salvini ticket and then later as an official party member.

Since joining the party, Vannacci has become the next most popular representative of the Lega, serving as a sort of leader *in pectore*.⁸⁶ Much like his boss Salvini, Vannacci has not shied away from controversy. In the leadup to the 2024 EU elections, Vannacci would ask his supporters to “put a Decima (an X symbol)” next to his name on their voting sheets. The usage of the term Decima is a direct reference to the Decima Mas, a fascist frogman military unit turned anti-partisan unit allied

⁸² “Meglio Putin di Zelensky’, Vannacci agita la Lega,” ANSA, September 9, 2025, https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2025/09/09/meglio-putin-di-zelensky-vannacci-agita-la-lega-_d6f55ad7-8632-4e5f-8ae2-73f9ba9b406f.html.

⁸³ During his service in the combat against the Islamic State terrorist group, Vannacci was awarded the US Legion of Merit. See “Missione in Iraq,” Ministero della Difesa, September 27, 2020, https://web.archive.org/web/20200927143549/https://www.difesa.it/OperazioniMilitari/op_intern_corso/Prima_Parthena/notizie_teatro/Pagine/Missione_Iraq_Riconoscimento_al_Generale_Roberto_Vannacci.aspx.

⁸⁴ Roberto Vannacci, *Il Mondo al Contrario* (self-published, 2023); See Guido Crosetto, “Nota Stampa del Ministro della Difesa Guido Crosetto,” Ministero della Difesa (website), December 4, 2023, <https://www.difesa.it/il-ministro/note-stampa/nota-stampa-del-ministro-della-difesa-guido-crosetto/30595.html>; Allan Kava, “Italy: Roberto Vannacci, far-right’s favorite general is in trouble,” *Le Monde*.

⁸⁵ La Stampa, “La proposta di Forza Nuova al generale Vannacci: ‘Si candidi per noi a Monza per il seggio di Berlusconi,’” *La Stampa*, August 19, 2023, https://www.lastampa.it/politica/2023/08/19/news/la_proposta_di_forza_nuova_al_generale_vannacci_si_candidi_per_noi_a_monza_per_il_seggio_di_berlusconi-13002885/.

⁸⁶ Braga, *Verdenero*, p. 13.

with the Nazis, leading to national condemnation.⁸⁷ This affinity for the Decima Mas nothing new as Vannacci had mentioned in March of 2024 that Decima members Luigi Durand de la Penne and Emilio Bianchi were his personal “hero’s.”⁸⁸ It is due to this high status and pre-existing radical affinities that makes his ties to far-right organizations all the more important. One such audience is that of the Identitarian movement headed by the Austrian activist Martin Sellner. A proponent of remigration (that is, the forced expulsion of millions of undocumented immigrants from Europe), Sellner has established a pan-European project with chapters across the old continent and sympathizers in mainstream parties.⁸⁹

On May 17, 2025, Sellner, along with Italian Identitarian Andrea Ballarati, organized the “Remigration Summit 2025” in the Lombard town of Gallarate.⁹⁰ Also present were senior far-right figures, Jean-Yves Le Gallou and Jared Taylor. While the event was initially supposed to be hosted in Milan, protests and a request from the city’s mayor to block the event forced the participants to relocate.⁹¹ Unable to attend in person, Vannacci provided a video message offering his endorsement of the event, stating: “Remigration means putting our citizens back at the center ... it is a battle for civilization and freedom, and above all, it is a battle for security, which today is the real dividing line between the right and the left.”⁹²

Other members of the Lega attended the event in person. These include the aforementioned Davide Quadri who, when asked about his party’s relationship with the Identitarian movement, confirmed that the Lega classifies itself as “identitarian.”⁹³ In addition to Quadri, League Group Leader in the Lombardy Regional Council Alessandro Corbetta and Lega MEP Isabella Tovaglieri were also in attendance. Both Corbetta and Tovaglieri have not only showcased their interest in the issue of remigration by attending the conference but have advocated for it on their personal social media platforms.⁹⁴ With Vannacci and the other supporters of remigration within the Lega, the identitarians have seemingly found their advocates within the party.

As this section has demonstrated, the sovereigntist Lega has a radical underbelly of actors capable of interfacing both with outside activists and the Lega’s leadership. However, simply shining a light on

⁸⁷ Chiara Zennardo, “Che cos’è stata la X Mas,” *WIRED*, May 31, 2024, <https://www.wired.it/article/x-mas-decima-formazione-vannacci/>

⁸⁸ Aldo Cazzullo, “Il bis di Vannacci: lobby, donne, gay. L’odio è il sentimento che muove il mondo,” *Corriere della Sera*, March 1, 2024, https://www.corriere.it/cronache/24_marzo_01/vannacci-intervista-69ccc14e-d742-11ee-975a-6160745d9362.shtml.

⁸⁹ Anthony Faiola and Souad Mekhennet, “Inside the World of Martin Sellner, Millennial Influencer of Europe’s Far Right,” *Washington Post*, September 28, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/09/28/martin-sellner-far-right-austria-election/>.

⁹⁰ The mayor of Gallarate is a Lega member named Andrea Cassani.

⁹¹ ANSA Editorial Board, “Sala chiederà incontro a Prefetto per vietare Remigration Summit,” ANSA (news agency), April 4, 2025, https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/cronaca/2025/04/04/sala-chiedera-incontro-a-prefetto-per-vietare-remigration-summit_95092acc-117a-46a8-8d88-c33782e7f36e.html.

⁹² Malpensa24, “Remigration Summit, Il Videomessaggio Di Roberto Vannacci,” YouTube, May 17, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3r2oIMiuwew>.

⁹³ La7 Attualità, “Remigration Summit, l’ultradestra Europea Si Raduna a Gallarate: Il Reportage,” YouTube, May 25, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GL6A4a0JmDE>.

⁹⁴ Alessandro Corbetta, “Parlare di #remigrazione non è reato! Ecco il mio intervento in Consiglio regionale in risposta a Pd e sinistre,” Twitter/X, June 4, 2025, <https://t.co/ivsaAav4lh>, <https://x.com/AleCorbetta89/status/1930175723907555528>; Isabella Tovaglieri, “Remigrazione subito!” Twitter/X, May 25, 2025, <https://x.com/isatovaglieri/status/1926586608624500975>.

these actors and issues is insufficient. An analysis of the party's ideological development is necessary to identify whether and on which issues the Lega has shifted toward the extreme right.

Ideological and Policy Development

In order to understand how Lega's ideology and stance towards certain key policy areas has evolved, the Europe Chapel Hill Expert Survey dataset (CHES-Europe) was selected as the unit of analysis. This dataset provides estimated "party positioning on ideology and policy issues, and international relations for national parties in countries across the world," coded by political scientists specializing in political parties and European integration.⁹⁵

Two comparative analyses were conducted, one which assessed the party's preference on specific policy issues and the other which compared the party's general ideological position relative to the other right-wing parties in Italy. Conducting a longitudinal analysis of the data will help identify any peaks and shifts in the party's stances over time. In order to conduct the first analysis, policy issues were selected to represent key issue areas. These include civil liberties, religious principles, multiculturalism, regionalism, and ethnic minorities. Each policy issue captures a key element of the social, ethnic, and institutional dimension of the party and, by illustrating their shift over time, it is possible to register to what extent the Lega truly developed a more radical sovereigntist position.

As the results from Figure 2 demonstrate, the policies fluctuated between the pre- and post-Salvini periods. Still, certain trends are visible. For example, support for the role of religious principles in politics and opposition to the political decentralization of the state to the regions have increased since Salvini's ascendancy. This, coupled with the staunch and persistent opposition to the expansion of rights for ethnic minorities, and to the integration of immigrants and asylum seekers, along with support for tough measures to fight crime, showcases how the party has adopted a policy stance more in line with that of traditional far-right parties. What is also noteworthy is that the party adopted a less illiberal stance on the issues of multiculturalism and religious principles.

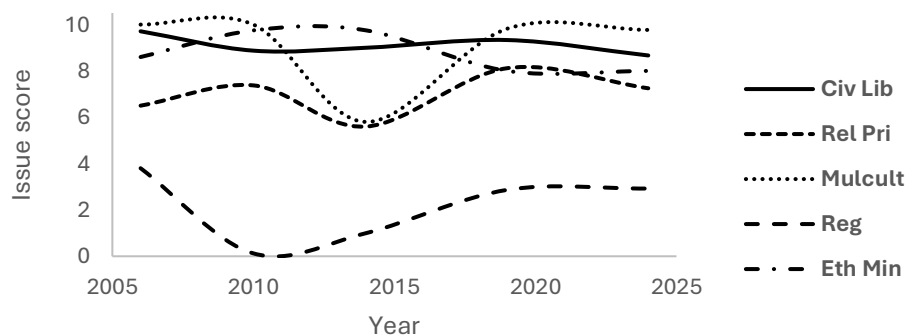


FIGURE 1: Change in Lega's position on selected issues.

Source: Author's elaboration of data obtained from CHES-Europe).

Note: Civ Lib = civil liberties, Rel Pri = religious principles, Multicult = multiculturalism, Reg = regionalism, Eth Min = ethnic minorities.

⁹⁵ Seth Jolly, Ryan Bakker, Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, Jonathan Polk, Jan Rovny, Marco Steenbergen, and Milada Anna Vachudova, "Chapel Hill Expert Survey Trend File, 1999–2019," *Electoral Studies* 75 (February 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102420>.

With regard to the ideological difference between the various parties, Figure 3 clearly illustrates how *the Lega* has since the early 2000s served as the one of the most right-wing parties in Italy. Furthermore, this trend had started in the twilight years of Bossi's regnum, illustrating how Salvini was not alone in animating the radical evolution of his party. While we cannot prove that the aforementioned actors played a role in this upward trajectory, it is worth noting that the Lega, according to this analysis, appeared as the perfect place for far-right activists to seek a mainstream veneer in an environment conducive to their beliefs.

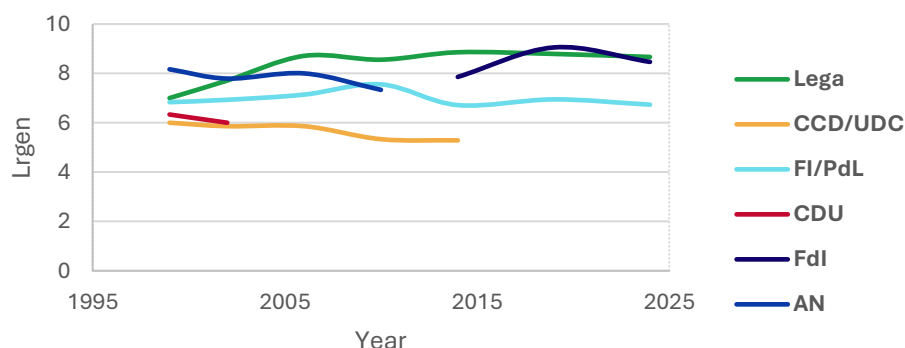


FIGURE 2: Ideological change of right-wing parties in Italy.

Source: Author's elaboration of data obtained from CHES-Europe.

Note: Lrgen = overall ideology; the closer to 10, the more right-wing the party is.

In summary, these findings indicate that not only was the Lega the most right-wing mainstream party for the majority of the 2000s, but under Salvini a notable shift occurred in the realm of policies, pushing the party toward a mainstream far-right stance and away from its secessionist roots.

Lega and the Future of the Italian Far Right

Salvini's speech at the aforementioned Victory Festival underscores the fact that, while constrained on certain issues by the FdI, the Lega remains mostly unchanged, vaunting sovereigntist and far-right policy preferences. As Meloni and the FdI take the wind out of the Lega's sails, the latter party will have to reassess its position vis-à-vis the rest of Italy's right wing. As this article has demonstrated, actors associated with far-right ideological traditions have been consistently present within the party's structures. Therefore, it is likely that Salvini will attempt to outflank Meloni from the right on issues that cause her embarrassment, such as immigration reform.

With Vannacci and Sardone holding key positions within the Lega's leadership structure, the ultra-right within the party has a direct link to Salvini and the party's inner core, giving them unprecedented access and potentially allowing them to shape a rightist turn. While this article does not speculate on the ultra-right's actual level of influence within the Lega, based on the results from the data analysis, the Lega appears to display favorable conditions for a radical shift. Therefore, this status, coupled with the proximity of Vannacci's and Sardone's positions to the ideas expressed during the Remigration Summit, indicates that a potential shift is more likely to occur on the topics of immigration and national identity.

Regarding the geopolitical orientation of the Lega, here as well a rather uncertain picture begins to emerge. According to Gallup polling data, the perception of Russia's leadership in Italy is overwhelmingly negative, garnering a 91% disapproval rate in 2024.⁹⁶

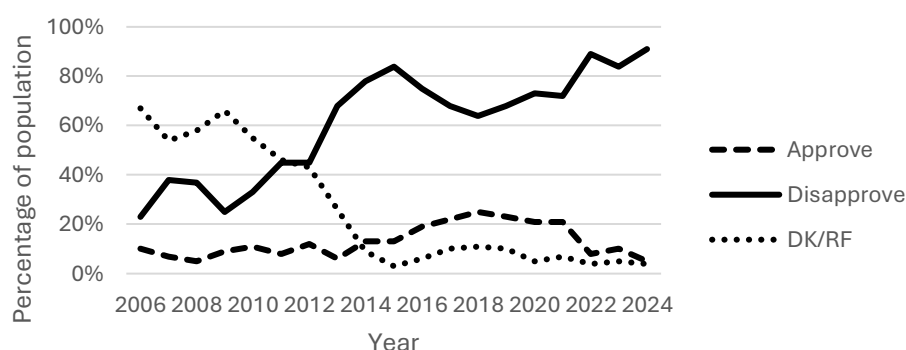


FIGURE 3: Change in approval rating of Russia's global leadership according to Italians.

Source: Author's elaboration of data obtained from Gallup.

Note: DK/RF = don't know / refused.

Therefore, pivoting toward an openly pro-Russian or pro-Putin position is unlikely to occur, as this would not only be unpopular with the wider Italian population but would result in a direct confrontation with FdI, something the Lega cannot afford at this time. However, while openly calling for a stronger partnership with Russia remains a political taboo, proposing policies that in a roundabout way support the Kremlin's geopolitical ambitions is not, with anti-NATO and anti-EU proposals remaining acceptable topics worth discussing in Italian politics. Thus, it remains to be seen how the question of geopolitics will be confronted by the Lega as the Ukraine War drags on.

Future research on the Lega will be important, especially because Meloni and the FdI receive most of the coverage dealing with the Italian right. In particular, research that tests the soundness of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey data is needed. Here, analysis of Salvini's speeches or the content of Lega's messages over time can be coded or studied using topic modeling software in order to map issue saliency over time. Additionally, an actor-based approach similar to that used here can help uncover who are the powerbrokers within the party and which groups exert the most influence on Salvini. By expanding the analysis beyond the powerbrokers, to include those who constitute the other factions within the party, a more holistic view of the Lega can begin to be presented. Finally, when staying with an actor-based approach, research should focus on party leaders and their particular views. Seeing as how the party is still ideologically fluid and tied to the personality of Salvini, a series of case studies of these actors can clarify what the guiding perspectives at the core of the party are.

As this article has sought to demonstrate, a cluster of radical actors has contributed to the construction of Lega's political identity since its inception. While the true extent of this cluster's influence is debatable, actors who are identified as belonging to this formation have risen to top leadership positions. With an expected further rightward shift of the Lega, these ultra-right actors will likely play an increasingly prominent role.

⁹⁶ Gallup World Poll, "Approval of Russia's Leadership," Gallup, 2024.