

How Matteo Salvini pulled Italy to the far right

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After years on the fringes of Italian politics, the populist leader of the Lega has stoked anti-immigrant panic and barged into power.



Matteo Salvini at the Lega's annual meeting in Pontida in July. Photograph: Miguel Medina/AFP/Getty

When [Matteo Salvini](#) - Italy's interior minister and the country's most popular politician - climbed up on the stage last month at the annual meeting of his party, the Lega, he looked out on a sea of green. Many of the party members were wearing green T-shirts, and some had even dyed their hair green. Green is the colour of the flag of Padania, the independent nation, named after the Po Valley, that Salvini's separatist party (formerly known as the Northern League) has long proposed creating to secede from the Italian state.

This year, however, the message had changed. A new slogan, "Italians first!", had replaced the old secessionist battle cries. Blue flags - the Italian national colour - mixed with the green, and Salvini stood at a blue-and-white podium in front of a blue backdrop. The enemy was no longer Rome, but Brussels, international banks and multinational corporations. This was Salvini's doing: in four years as its leader, he has turned a movement of regional separatism into its seeming opposite, a nationalist party.

The Lega's populist radical-right message - including Salvini's [pledge to deport](#) 500,000 "illegal immigrants" - propelled the party to the forefront of the rightwing alliance that took the most votes in this spring's national elections. Under Salvini's leadership, the Lega went from 4% of the vote to 18%, surpassing Silvio Berlusconi's party and winning a place as an equal partner in a coalition government with the other big winner, the [Five Star Movement](#). Five Star was founded by the comedian [Beppe Grillo](#), with a similar populist appeal but a message that is less nationalistic in tone.

As a result, the Lega's annual meeting at Pontida - where a confederation of northern cities signed an oath in 1167 to halt the invasion of [Italy](#) by Frederick Barbarossa, the German Holy Roman Emperor - had the spirit of a victory celebration. "Four years ago on this stage," Salvini told the crowd in early July, "you probably shared my own doubts: people thought the Lega was finished." Instead, he continued, the party had spread its message far beyond its old northern base. "Who

would have thought we would be part of a winning coalition in Molise and Sicily? That we would win in places like Siena, Viterbo, Pisa and Terni?"

As interior minister, Salvini quickly made his mark by [turning away](#) a boatload of more than 600 African refugees on a ship named Aquarius operated by the not-for-profit organisation SOS Méditerranée, which rescues people stranded at sea trying to reach Europe. While the move attracted international condemnation, it greatly boosted Salvini's standing in Italy. Public opinion polls show support for the Lega [has jumped](#) from 18% to about 30%, slightly ahead of the Five Star Movement; Salvini now has the highest approval ratings of any Italian politician.

"While we are standing here, the third boatload of slaves in a single month is not arriving in Italy, but heading in another direction ... From Pontida the warning has arrived for the human traffickers, as for the mafiosi and camorristi: the carnival is over." *La pacchia è finita* ("the party is over") is one of Salvini's favourite phrases, and it could be found on the T-shirts of many Lega members at the Pontida rally.

Attacks on migrants (and Islam, gay marriage and criminals) have taken the place of separatism in the Lega's rhetoric. When Salvini was a young city councilman in 1999, he refused to shake hands with Italy's then president, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, saying: "No, thanks, you don't represent me." When Salvini was elected to the Italian parliament in 2008, he arrived in Rome in a T-shirt bearing the words "Padania is not Italy".

But by the time Salvini took over as party secretary in late 2013, at the age of 40, the Lega - and the idea of northern separatism - appeared moribund. The Lega's founder, Umberto Bossi, had suffered a massive stroke in 2004, but did not relinquish control of the party. His endless insulting harangues about southern Italian peasants and his failed efforts to set up a separatist Padanian parliament fatigued voters. The Lega's vote share dwindled from 10% to a mere 4%, and had almost no appeal outside the northern third of the country.

Then in 2012, prosecutors discovered that the Northern League's treasurer had misappropriated some €40m in public money, and that hundreds of thousands of euros had gone to the Bossi family. A party that had run on the slogan of "Roma, ladrona!" ("thieving Rome") had been caught out in the basest kind of corruption. Money had gone to pay for renovations of the Bossi home, a luxury car and a phony university degree purchased in Albania for Bossi's less-than-brilliant son, who was being groomed for a leadership position.

Salvini managed to wrest the party from Bossi and the old guard, dropped the word "Northern" (against their wishes), and embraced nationalism. What propelled the Lega from the margins to the centre of Italian life was a combination of Salvini's shrewd political instincts and a perfect storm of external events. A first sign of that change came in 2014, when Salvini acknowledged that he would be rooting for the national football team - a big concession (believe it or not) for a Lega leader.

The battle cry at his demonstrations was no longer the exploitation of the north by the rest of the country, but immigration, Roma encampments and the indifference of the [European Union](#) to Italy's problems. His first big rally featured a banner saying "Stop the Invasion". In 2015, he took a risk by organising a major rally in Rome - unusual for the Lega - and took the stage with leaders of neo-fascist groups, against the advice of older Lega leaders, who were vocally anti-fascist. Salvini brushed aside the criticism as a small price for creating a broader, national message. "For tender-hearted journalists and leftists, the problem is 10 rightwing kids reading a pamphlet," he said. "For me, the problem is the thousands of illegal immigrants stealing, raping and dealing drugs."

Salvini, like the leaders of other insurgent populist movements, has made highly effective use of

social media. If Donald Trump has Twitter, Salvini is the king of Facebook. In the second half of 2015, Salvini tripled his Facebook following: capitalising on the refugee crisis and growing discontent with [Matteo Renzi](#)'s centrist government, he added nearly 400,000 followers in just six months. At the time, the Italian edition of Wired magazine reported that Salvini posted an average of 10 times a day, "doing in a week what his competitors do in six months". Since then, his following has increased more than fivefold, to 2.9 million.

The magazine found that Salvini's following often spiked after he made an especially provocative statement - such as declaring, in 2016, that the pope's welcome to immigrants would "encourage and fund an unprecedented invasion". But another Wired study found that Salvini has become increasingly sophisticated in the last few years, stimulating positive feelings as well as the usual negative emotions of anger and fear. "The rhetorical strategy is clear: you lower the reader's guard by playing on fear and anger, but also suggesting that, by putting faith in the Lega, things will get better," the magazine concluded. "There is a positive element to his posts, even a bit of joy."

However, the old message is still loud and clear. In a post this month, Salvini wrote: "A 25-year-old girl was attacked in the Milan train station, saving herself from RAPE only through use of pepper spray. The rapist was arrested today, let's hope this time he finds a judge who keeps him in prison for years. P.S. I am not allowed to tell you that the rapist is Nigerian, an illegal immigrant with a criminal record, or I will be accused of RACISM." (Salvini declined to mention that the victim of the attempted rape in Milan was herself an immigrant, who was returning home at 5am after working a night shift.)

Another post from the same day makes more gentle fun of his opponents: "At the 'anti-racist' rally of the PD [Democratic party] in Milan they complain about their small numbers ... It's OK, guys, maybe it will go better next time."

In spite of his hard line on immigration and inflammatory rhetoric, Salvini has actually presented himself as a softer and more approachable figure to most Italians. This impression has been aided by the contrast with Bossi, the Lega's founder, who carried himself like a barroom brawler, threatening to punch protesters at public rallies and making free use of obscenities and insults. In 2001, Bossi said he only used the Italian flag to "wipe his arse". Salvini, on the other hand, comes across as the nice guy who lives down the block. He is known for giving blood and organising blood-donation drives, and makes frequent references to "mamma" and "papa", to goodness and generosity.

"Matteo is very human," says Lucia Borgonzoni, a Lega member of parliament and the new minister of culture. "He is very approachable, likes to be with people, takes as many pictures with people as they want. Not because he has to, but because he likes it. As well as political ability, he has real human qualities. Matteo transmits a sense of hope."

Salvini has skilfully deployed this double persona for political gain. In 2014, Salvini made a provocative visit to a Roma encampment on the edge of Bologna, after Borgonzoni, then a city councillor, had been slapped during an earlier visit. (Salvini had declared he would happily take a bulldozer to Roma shantytowns, so the Lega was understandably unpopular there.)

When Borgonzoni and Salvini arrived, their car was predictably surrounded by protestors, who began banging on the windows, while one demonstrator jumped on the front of the car as it began to drive away. "The driver started to speed up because these people were genuinely violent," Borgonzoni recalls, "but Matteo told him to slow down, he was worried that the young man might get hurt. That's Matteo. He cares about everyone. Meanwhile, our critics on the left did not condemn the violence - saying, 'They asked for it. What did they expect?' As if violence against your opponents is somehow different than other kinds of violence."

Above all, it was good politics. The incident depicted Salvini as a tough guy, but with a kind heart - unafraid to visit a Roma camp he had promised to bulldoze, but avoiding violence and even being a victim of aggression. Images of the attack on Salvini spread quickly, and won him another 10,000 Facebook followers in a single day.



Salvini visiting a Roma camp in Turin in February. Photograph: Alamy

Salvini moves deftly between online and offline politics: his Facebook page boosts the turnout for his appearances, and posts videos of his speeches and interviews to build up his online following. The young heads of his social media team are integral to Salvini's success: they were often present at the most important political meetings, including those in which he negotiated the Lega's partnership with the Five Star Movement.

Although Salvini cultivates a strongman image, he alternates soothing traditional Italian references to love, friendship and family with harsh attacks on his enemies: criminal immigrants, mainstream journalists, financial and cultural elites, faceless EU bureaucrats and bankers. He addresses his Facebook followers as "friends", but makes frequent use of the term "enemy" as well.

"Populist groups always have to have an in-group and an out-group - an 'us' and a 'them'," explains Nicoletta Cavazza, a political scientist at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. "Salvini managed to keep the basic structure of the Lega discourse, but shifted the 'us' to all Italians - and he substituted Rome with Brussels, so the enemy was no longer southerners, but immigrants."

Salvini's rise to power has heightened concerns in Italy about the escalation of racist and xenophobic violence in the country. Dozens of attacks on black people and Roma have been recorded in the last year, all over Italy, from Treviso in the north to Gioia Tauro in the south, including Florence and Rome. The attacks range from drive-by shootings with air guns, in which the attackers were reported to shout "Salvini!" to the assassination of a Malian trade unionist campaigning for fair pay for migrant workers. An Italian athlete of Nigerian descent, Daisy Osakue, the Italian under-23 champion discus thrower, was [hit in the eye](#) by an egg thrown from a car. Police have been pursuing attackers and making arrests, but the government has been more reticent. After a torrent of criticism for his anti-migrant policies - culminating with the headline "[Get behind me, Salvini](#)" on the cover of Italy's largest Catholic magazine - Salvini responded with a favorite phrase of Mussolini: "many enemies, much honor." He also insisted that the idea of widespread Italian racism was "an invention of the left".

Others worry about an increasingly ugly atmosphere. A judge in Milan described how she had been harassed by a car full of Italian men, who shouted at her and followed her after she gave some loose change to a Bangladeshi selling flowers near her office. "What are you doing?" they yelled. "These people are a nuisance and need to leave, and you give them money. *Basta!*"

But the Lega's Lorenzo Fontana, now the families minister, insists that the only racism is one practised against Italians who dare to think differently about immigration. "Racism has become an ideological weapon," Fontana wrote on Facebook, "used by the globalists and their slaves (some

journalists and mainstream commentators, certain parties) to point the finger at the Italian people and falsely accuse them of every kind of dirty business.”

Salvini’s brand of populism is not without precedent in Italy. The Lega Lombarda, the original Lega founded by Bossi, was a protest party against the corruption and fiscal overreach of the government in Rome. In the late 1980s and early 90s, it captured a growing popular anger and disillusionment with a system that was labelled *Partitocrazia* - “rule by the parties” - in which the politicians in power divided up the spoils and bribes for government contracts to finance their parties, and often, to line their own pockets.

The Lega’s rebellion against the system helped set the tone for the major anti-corruption investigation known as Operation Clean Hands, whose findings led directly to the dissolution of the Christian Democratic party and four other satellite parties that had traditionally made up Italy’s coalition governments during the postwar period.

Ironically, it was a major beneficiary of this system - the TV tycoon Silvio Berlusconi - who rode this populist wave to power in 1994. Like Trump, Berlusconi perfected a style of billionaire populism, a super-rich and super-successful man who spoke in the plain, often crude idiom of the man on the street, bragged about his wealth and success with women, and promised to make all Italians as rich as he was. He railed against the country’s cultural and political elites, and promised to substitute his northern-Italian business knowhow for the corrupt inefficiency and bureaucratic red tape of the professional politicians in Rome.

Berlusconi gained power by shrewdly allying himself with Bossi’s separatist Lega Nord in the north, and with a nationalist far-right, post-fascist party, the National Alliance, in the south. He stole Bossi’s populist thunder and co-opted the Lega by giving the “anti-system” party money and positions of power in his governments. Of course, Berlusconi’s populism proved to be entirely phony. He was inept at governance, and more interested in protecting his own private interests than reforming Italy’s economy. He left in place - and exploited to the hilt - the patronage system that the old parties had created; and Italy’s economy consistently performed worse than virtually all 28 countries in the European Union.

Over 25 years, Berlusconi alternated - and sometimes shared power - with the main centre-left party. The merry-go-round of coalition governments, of infighting and compromises among the country’s leaders, created the impression of a political world that was principally concerned with its own preservation rather than the growing problems of the country as a whole.

This set the scene for a new wave of populism, incarnated by the Five Star Movement, now Salvini’s partner in government. Five Star is the brainchild of an unlikely alliance between Grillo, the foul-mouthed comic, and a cerebral internet guru called Gianroberto Casaleggio. Grillo had built a large, faithful audience for his standup performances, which skewered corrupt Italian politicians, greedy bankers and multinational corporations, and sometimes featured bizarre conspiracy theories about cancer cures and the dangers of vaccines being covered up by pharmaceutical companies. Casaleggio correctly intuited that with a blog and a well-run interactive website (run by his company in Milan, Casaleggio Associates) Grillo could become a political force. The blog, which was set up in 2005, attracted millions of visitors, and morphed into the Five Star Movement in 2009.

Using crowdsourcing techniques, it spread like wildfire, forming local “meetup” groups around the country. In 2008, Grillo gathered some 3 million people in 200 cities for the second instalment of what he elegantly called “Fuck-You Day”, in which his followers showed their middle finger to the country’s political parties. At the same time, Grillo pushed fairly reasonable measures such as a proposal to prevent indicted or convicted politicians from sitting in parliament - a response to

Berlusconi's habit of placing his most compromised associates in parliament to give them immunity. In 2013, Five Star stunned the political world by winning 25% of the national vote.

For a time it seemed the centre-left had found its own dynamic leader in Matteo Renzi, the young former mayor of Florence, who in 2014, at the age of 39, became Italy's youngest-ever prime minister. Renzi promised to send the old leaders to the scrap heap and revitalise Italy's economy. In the 2014 European elections, his Democratic party (PD) won 40% of the vote - a huge total in Italy's fragmented, proportional system. But Renzi's reforms ran afoul of internal opposition and a brutal recession that dragged on longer in Italy than elsewhere. In late 2016, a referendum was held on a bill of constitutional reforms that Renzi had proposed. The public voted against it, and he was forced to resign, setting the stage for the elections of 2018.



Salvini and Silvio Berlusconi in Rome in May Photograph: Simona Granati/Corbis via Getty

The two outsider parties - Lega and Five Star - ran in the March 2018 elections not as allies, but competitors. Salvini ran in a centre-right alliance with Berlusconi and a couple of far-right, neo-fascist parties. Both Lega and Five Star describe themselves as being "neither left nor right". Salvini's followers are decidedly Trumpian, while Five Star attracts disaffected people from across the political spectrum, including younger and better-educated left-of-centre voters. The party has always emphasised environmental issues, clean energy and alternative transportation, and opposed plans for high-speed rail lines through environmentally fragile areas.

However, both parties were sharply critical of Italy's ruling establishment, while also promising to maintain most of the country's generous social programmes. Both were highly critical of the EU and the euro, and cast a fond eye toward Russia's president, Vladimir Putin.

Events played into their hands. As Libya fell into chaos, the number of desperate refugees hoping to reach [Europe](#) by boat increased exponentially. In 2014, Salvini's first year as party secretary, there was a huge jump in the number of people entering Italy from north Africa - from 42,000 in 2013 to 170,000 in 2014, reaching a peak of 181,000 in 2016, a year in which 5,000 people drowned trying to make the crossing.

That same year, some 157,000 Italians left the country in search of a better future. While these two migrations are not connected, for many Italians this all feeds into a gut feeling that their country is heading in the wrong direction. Salvini's great political achievement has been to turn this discontent against the enemies of his choosing: migrants, the EU and Italy's political elite.

The emigration of young Italians is largely the result of a prolonged period of economic stagnation. In the early 1990s, Italy's economy was the same size as Britain's. It is now 26% smaller, and Italy's GDP is still 10% lower than it was before the 2008 crash. Unemployment remains above 10%, and youth unemployment is above 30%. Some 2 million young people - most of them skilled and educated - have left the country during the last decade to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

Renzi's centre-left government passed a "jobs act", which was supposed to boost employment by giving employers greater flexibility in hiring and firing. This had only a small impact on employment,

but increased the number of young people hired on a temporary basis, often with low salaries. Many young Italians live with their parents well into their 30s, too economically insecure to marry and start families. "You need an element of certainty to start a family," says Massimo Garavaglia, a senator for the Lega and undersecretary of finance in the new coalition government.

While stopping boatloads of refugees from north Africa may satisfy an emotional need to restore a sense of order to immigration, it doesn't change the basic demographic arithmetic, which shows that Italy actually needs a healthy level of immigration to survive. Last year, 664,000 Italians died, while only 464,000 Italian babies were born - 100,000 of those were of mixed couples, with one Italian parent and one foreign-born one, according to Istat, the national statistics bureau. If the country is going to maintain something close to its current population of 60 million and have enough working people to keep its pension system afloat, it will have to add to its population. Most of Italy's immigrants are young, arrived legally, and are working and paying taxes.

Both the Lega and Five Star jumped on the immigration issue during the election campaign. Luigi Di Maio, the 32-year-old leader of the Five Star Movement - who is deputy prime minister together with Salvini - attacked the NGOs who were rescuing refugees at sea and bringing them to Italy. "Who pays these taxis in the Mediterranean?" Di Maio provocatively asked.

And while Salvini and Di Maio say they have nothing against legal immigration, they seem dead against most means of encouraging it. Salvini vehemently opposed the "ius soli" bill proposed by the previous centre-left government, which would have given citizenship to children of immigrants if they were born in Italy or arrived at a young age and did their schooling there, and at least one of their parents had been in Italy legally for five years. The Five Star Movement, deeply conflicted on the issue, decided to abstain from voting, effectively killing the bill.

When Tito Boeri, a respected professional economist who heads Italy's national pensions system, pointed out that it would collapse without a steady flow of immigration, Salvini said Boeri would soon be looking for another job. Boeri, whose appointment is scheduled to last until 2019, also pointed out that blocking legal immigration actually increases illegal immigration - the kind that Salvini and Di Maio really hate. "In general, a reduction of legal immigration of 10% leads to an increase of illegal immigration of between 3% and 5%," Boeri said.

Despite the increase in immigration in the past 15 years, Italy's crime rates have actually gone down - but crime is much higher among illegal immigrants, who often live in makeshift quarters, hang out and sleep in parks and train stations, and are hired to do irregular or illegal work that can range from hawking counterfeit designer knockoffs to selling drugs.

Boeri also pointed out that Italians have a seriously exaggerated perception of the actual presence of immigrants. It is true the immigrant population has risen rapidly, from 2.5 million in 2007 to more than 5 million in 2017, according to official statistics. But Italians believe immigrants make up 26% of the population, while the true figure is only 9% - this is the largest gap between perception and reality in Europe. "It is the result not only of prejudice but out of real disinformation," Boeri said.

The EU's policy - or lack of policy - has only made matters worse. "The European Union made a huge mistake in selfishly leaving Italy alone to contend with the refugee crisis," says Pier Giorgio Ardeni, director of the Cattaneo Institute, a social science thinktank in Bologna. The EU rules were that the countries receiving immigrants had the duty to sort out those who qualify for political asylum from those who do not. This meant the burden of the massive uptick in refugees fell mainly on Italy, Greece and Spain - all countries contending with major economic problems.



Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini, Italy's two current deputy prime ministers. Photograph: Elisabetta Villa/Getty Images

The Italian government and the EU agreed to pay €35 a day for those willing to house refugees. A few communities have used these funds wisely, to fix up abandoned housing and reinvigorate towns that have lost residents in recent years. [Others, however](#), have housed refugees in substandard dwellings and pocketed most of the money. "Do you know how much I make with immigrants?" one of the chief defendants in the prosecution of mafia corruption in the Rome city government said to an interlocutor in a wiretapped phone conversation. "They are worth [more than drugs](#)."

Salvini cannily anticipated and took advantage of the crisis. He began hitting out against the EU well ahead of the Brexit vote. He had the political intuition (or luck) to back Trump when other European politicians - including Berlusconi - recoiled in horror. Salvini travelled to Philadelphia to meet - and, importantly, to be photographed with - Trump in April 2016, before he had secured the Republican nomination. "It's the triumph of the people against globalisation, against the mainstream press and the big economic interests," Salvini declared after Trump's victory.

While defying calls from the Roman Catholic church to welcome immigrants, Salvini avoids direct confrontation and insists his policies are perfectly consistent with church doctrine. "The catechism," he said again at Pontida, "says rich nations should welcome strangers within the limits of the possible. In Italy, we have reached the limits of the possible. We apply the catechism by opening Italy's doors to women and children who come here legally on aeroplanes, but no more men on rubber dinghies. We will help them grow up and work in their own countries. Let's spend in Africa the money that needs to be spent."

One of the big questions of Italian politics is how this odd-couple marriage between the Lega and Five Star will work. Although the Lega is technically the junior partner in the alliance, having far fewer seats in parliament, Salvini has stolen the spotlight from his fellow deputy prime minister Di Maio. (The prime minister, Giuseppe Conte, a virtually unknown constitutional law professor, was a compromise solution.) Five Star's founder, Grillo, insists he wants nothing to do with electoral politics and has delegated the day-to-day running of the party to Di Maio, who has only about five years of political experience.

Five Star's representatives are almost all relatively new to politics. They are often better educated than the Lega leaders, and more likely to have university degrees, but less experienced in the hard-knock world of practical politics. Moreover, Five Star was born out of a deep distrust of traditional politics, and its representatives (they dislike the word "leaders") have taken a vow to withdraw from electoral politics after only two terms in office. This would mean Di Maio being unable to run for office after this current parliament - at the age of just 37. Salvini, by contrast, has been in politics

for 25 years, and appears in it for the long term.

“The Five Star Movement is a thin, virtual party that exists mostly on social media,” says Flavio Tosi, the former Lega mayor of Verona. “The Lega by contrast is rooted in the territory, has competently governed many cities and regions, and has developed a leadership class.”

In forming their heterodox coalition, Salvini and Di Maio hammered out a “contract” for their government, agreeing on several key ideas. “There are things we have in common, and at the same time, the Lega has certain rightwing ideas that we don’t share,” says Maria Edera Spadoni, a Five Star member of parliament and vice-president of the chamber of deputies, Italy’s lower house, who worked as a flight attendant before she began attending Five Star meetings in her home town of Reggio Emilia in 2009. “The beauty of the idea of a government contract is that it lays out what we have both agreed to, and leaves out the things on which we don’t agree: certain environmental issues, gay marriage. Certain civil rights will not be touched.”

More important than the stability of the coalition, however, is whether the new government can reverse the 25-year economic decline that helped fuel the populist revolt. The Lega and its allies campaigned on two big economic ideas. First, a flat tax, which would reduce all rates to 15% or 20%, a huge cut from Italy’s comparatively high taxes. And second, the abolition of the so-called “Fornero law”, which raised the retirement age to 66. For a country with a rapidly ageing population and the highest life expectancy in Europe (83 years), lowering the retirement age seems to most economists pure folly. Five Star also pledged to dismantle the retirement law. But their big election promise was another expensive item: the introduction of a guaranteed minimum wage.

Few experts see these proposals as workable, or capable of producing long-term growth. “These proposals to abolish the Fornero law and to institute a flat tax are pure demagoguery,” says Ardeni, of the Cattaneo Institute. Significantly, the new government has put those proposals on hold while it attends to other business. For the moment, the government says it will only apply the flat tax to businesses, not individuals.

If the new government struggles on the economic front, the temptation will be to push “identity” issues, which cost nothing, but rally the troops. Salvini has already proposed [placing the crucifix in every public place](#) (not just in classrooms, where it already exists) in order to reinforce the country’s traditions. He has also pushed the idea of armed self-defence along the lines of US “stand your ground” laws, which permit the use of firearms in self-defence against an intruder. The Lega families minister, Fontana, proposed scrapping a law that bans hate speech, the promotion of racial discrimination and the advocacy of fascism – a proposal immediately rejected by Di Maio and Five Star. Fontana also caused a scandal by announcing there was no such thing as a “gay family”.

In explaining his own conversion from fervent separatist to Italian nationalist, Salvini insists the common denominator is the question of identity and territory. “I was also drawn to politics linked to a territory,” he explained in an interview for a recent biography (*Il Militante*, by the journalists Alessandro Franzi and Alessandro Madron). “At school everything was left v right, communists and fascists; what interested me was the discussion of identity, autonomy, federalism and community.” If he is a nationalist and not a regional separatist, he says, it is because the threats to identity have changed. Before, a centralised Italian state was eroding regional culture and language, and overtaxing the prosperous north. Now the threats to identity, in his view, are an overbearing EU, globalisation and out-of-control immigration.

Others see Salvini’s about-face in a more jaundiced light. “I think his nationalism is a cynical calculation; but from a purely Machiavellian point of view, it’s been masterful,” says Tosi, who was a rival to Salvini in the battle for leadership in 2013. “They don’t have the stomach or the ability to

deal with the big structural reforms Italy needs, and so I think they are going to hammer away at the immigration issue. Immigration is the glue that holds them together. But if you can't deal with the economic issues, eventually the voters will recognise that - and I don't know what will happen then."

Alexander Stille

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