European Crises and Right-Wing Populism: The Case of Lega Nord

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The link between post-truth and right-wing populism has been investigated under various lenses, such as through populist discourses, social media and global politics. In the European Union, populism, despite not being a new phenomenon, has gained an alarming share of the electorate during the continent's long period of crises and distress in recent years following the Eurozone crisis, the refugee crisis and the Brexit disintegration challenge. Under this prism, a series of questions arise: What is the relationship between the rise of right-wing populism and the European crises? How has the post-truth contributed to the increase of right-wing populism in Europe? This chapter first demonstrates the legitimacy gap, and the related distrust of the European project, which heightened during the aforementioned crises and offered a 'fruitful field' for right-wing populism to gain greater relevance and influence by openly using anti-EU rhetoric. Secondly, it argues that while in a 'regime of shared truth', right-wing populism never succeeded in gaining a broader consensus. Yet, in the post-truth age, it offered an array of unrestrained 'truths', extensively using social media as a key platform for direct communication with the public, threatening democracy itself.

This study adopts a threefold narrative. Firstly, it offers a conceptual analysis of right-wing populism in a post-truth age. This section focuses on the definitions and links between European right-wing populism and the post- truth. The second section discusses the relationship between the crises, the rise of populism and the post-truth age. It shows that since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the European Monetary Union's (EMU) weaknesses, as well as the financial and refugee crises were capitalised by right-wing populist parties. Populist right-wingers thus took advantage of this decline of trust to mobilise economic polarisation and nativist sentiments, spreading a particular anti-EU rhetoric. However, in a post-truth environment, right-wing populist parties have been able to spread their political rhetoric as never before, extensively using social media as a platform for direct, yet unrestrained, communication with the public. This has resulted in unprecedented electoral success at national and European levels – further challenging democratic values and the European project itself. The third part focuses on a case study of the Italian Lega Nord – which was not originally a right-wing populist party, instead belonging to a populist and ethno-regionalist party family rooted under a pro-EU and anti-statism ideology. However, in order to respond to the challenges of European integration, the party has progressively loosened its original features and joined the right-wing populist party family. Therefore, Lega Nord's transformation helps shed light on the link between the accretion of right-wing populism and the European crises. Lega Nord's Matteo Salvini has been the European leader that has used social media the most in his political campaigns over recent years, reaching more than 3,000,000 followers in 2018 (Cervi 2020). Such a successful strategy has allowed Lega to reach the best electoral results in its history in the national election of 2018 and in the European elections of 2019. In this vein, Lega shows how the post-truth age has allowed the spreading of right- wing populist ideology as never before, threatening European democratic values and the European Union political project.

Right-wing populism in a post-truth age: A conceptual analysis

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Right-wing populism and post-truth are heterogeneous concepts that merge in contemporary global politics, challenging democratic political regimes and values. Thus, before focusing on the main issue of this chapter, it is useful to develop a conceptual analysis clarifying the link between the two phenomena.

Although a general definition of populism is still lacking in the academic literature, from a theoretical perspective, populism has been conceptualised by some key terms (Caiani and Graziano 2021, 2–3):

- as a 'political rhetoric' that is marked by public sentiments of disappointment;
- as an 'ideology', which considers society being segregated into two antagonistic groups: 'the people' vis-à-vis 'the elite',
- and as 'a type of organisation', a political strategy, dominated by the presence of a charismatic leadership.

With regards to right-wing populism, two further features have to be added: authoritarianism, related to law-and-order doctrines, and nativism, related to the importance of the homogeneity and the purity of the nation (Bergmann 2020; Heinisch, Massetti and Mazzoleni 2020) – implying an attitude of repulsion and exclusion of the 'aliens'. Finally, in the framework of the European Union, due to the link between the deepening integration process and the limitation of the state's sovereignty, right-wing populism has gained a further feature – Euroscepticism.

Quoting the Oxford definition of post-truth, McIntyre (2018) describes it as the framework in which public opinion is more shaped by emotional discourses than by truth. Indeed, the post-truth age occurs when – 'depending on what one wants to be true – some facts matter more than others' (McIntyre 2018). While strategic extraction of partial facts from its context enables the 'fabrication of a reality' in agreement with personal desires or beliefs, objective facts hampering personal realisation are dismissed. Social media has played a central role in the advent of post-truth. It has multiplied the sources of information while also allowing content to be more quickly disseminated. Moreover, virtual platforms follow the same logic of the post- truth age: algorithms select content and produce 'alternative information ecosystems' (Cosentino 2020) according to users' interests and feelings. Thus, social media becomes a type of 'market of truths' (Harsin 2018), where everyone may choose the most convenient one, without any kind of gatekeeper (Corvi 2020), i.e. without a process of content filtration and editorial control on the accountability of sources. Hence, social media contributes to blurring the boundaries between truths and lies, creating a dis-information system where it is almost impossible to discern between real facts and fake news. Therefore, as McIntyre points out, 'what seems new in the post-truth era is a challenge not just to the idea of knowing reality but to the existence of reality itself' (McIntyre 2018).

Nonetheless, Oxford dictionary's definition of 'post-truth' is not exhaustive, lacking the deep causes of the phenomenon – much of which has been explored in prior chapters. Social media may be used to share knowledge, scientific issues, news, information, and false and distorted representations of reality. Therefore, why does the post-truth occur? Why have communicational potentialities of social media become a driver for negationist movements or, as it is the case in this article, for right-wing populist discourses? According to Bennett and Livingston (2021), analyses only addressing new communicational technologies 'tend to focus on the symptoms and not on the causes'. The latter must be searched out in the deep crisis of what Foucault named a 'regime of truth'. As Cosentino (2018) and Harsin (2015) point out, what is really at stake in the rise of the 'post-truth regime' is not the opposition between a hypothetical objective reality and subjective emotions, but rather the loss of a shared 'truth', guaranteed by political institutions and by a narrow set of mainstream media. For Bennett and Livingston, the rise of the post-truth age results from a deep 'crisis of legitimacy of authoritative institutions' (Bennett and Livingston 2021, 4), which is rooted in the dominance of 'disinformation strategies' in political communication during the last decades. Political forces all over the world have systematically used communicational strategies which distort reality while searching for popular legitimacy to improve unpopular policies. This has resulted in a progressive loss of trust in democratic institutions, and in official information networks. Thus, social media has consolidated itself as an alternative information channel.

However, we argue that a communicational framework per se does not succeed in explaining the complexity of the post-truth age. As analysed later in the chapter, the European case sheds light on the essential link between the multiple crises that occurred during the beginning of the twenty-first century – the rise of populism and post-truth. Indeed, the European case in general, and the Italian case of Lega in particular, demonstrate that the political

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consequences of monetary union, as well as how the financial and refugee crises have progressively increased distrust in the EU project, determining a favourable framework for nationalist and nativist rhetoric of right-wing parties. The latter have constantly instrumentalised the structural contradictions of the European project and its critical conjunctures to improve their visibility as a way of gaining popular consensus. In the pre-post-truth age, the mainstream media were the main channel for political communication – and the democratic 'regime of truth' was still able to produce shared values. In such a context, the populist use of popular malaise had never succeeded in becoming a widespread and threatening phenomenon. Thus, right-wing populist parties were forced to maintain a 'defensive attitude' toward both the public sphere and democratic institutions (McDonnell and Werner 2019). During the last decade, the post-truth age has given the EU's right-wing populism a framework to grow. While the increase in popular disaffection in the European project enhances angry and feared citizen groups, social media allows right-wing populist parties to shift away from mediation of the public sphere and to establish a direct dialogue between political figures and their followers. Thus, through social news sources, right- wing populist forces have succeeded in 'mobilising angry publics around emotionally charged themes' (Bennett and Livingston 2021), such as regarding the financial or refugee crises. Therefore, they have constantly improved their visibility and increased their popular consensus, becoming a dangerous threat to Europe's multiculturalist and inclusive values.

According to Tumber and Waisbord (2021), there is a deep affinity between social media and right-wing populist rhetoric. However, the latter has succeeded in transforming the 'misinformation system', i.e. the domination of emotions and wills and the impossibility to discern truths from lies in social media, into a 'disinformation system' (Cosentino 2020). In this regard, they have built a political strategy based on the intentional manipulation of information for electoral goals. Thereby, right-wing populism has played a key role in the statement of post-truth as a fundamentally political problem, as a 'regime of post-truth' menacing western democracies.

European crises and the rise of populism

Although there has been a general appreciation for and adherence to the European integration project, legitimacy issues have become increasingly more noticeable as integration advanced. In turn, weak responses to crises further undermined public trust to the project itself. In these terms, the new century witnessed a new wave of populism and a reinforced anti-EU rhetoric (Mudde 2019). Thus, decisions made at the European level have become part of domestic political discourse which has incorporated a significant level of Euroscepticism (Newsome; Riddervold and Trondal 2021, 597; Lacey and Nicolaïdis 2020, 378). Thus, the EU's flaws and perceived weak responses to crises have echoed across the political spectrum of member states. In populist right-wing propaganda, Euroscepticism has been engineered around a division between European economic 'elites' and common 'people', having been fed by disinformation over the endangerment of migration to the supremacy of national identities. On the other hand, populism is not concerned with truth-telling. A simplistic claim of populism, 'you have your truth, I have mine', has also promoted polarisation (Waisbord 2018, 14). In addition, in the post-truth age, social media have been disseminating 'fact- less' information at a scale unparalleled in history. However, as Bennett and Livingston have claimed, 'putting the spotlight on social media alone misses deeper erosions of institutional authority' (2021, 5), and the broader picture of democratic disruption (Tumber and Waisbord 2021).

The creation of EMU in 1990 marked a significant point in terms of European integration. It indicated the transfer of sovereignty from a national to a supranational level in monetary policy, simultaneously creating new supranational institutions such as the European Central Bank and a common currency – a key symbol of a collective identity (Torres et al. 2004; Negri et al. 2020). The public initially perceived EMU as a technocratic project justified upon a macroeconomic rationale and led by bureaucrats and bankers. Likewise, member states' efforts to meet the eurozone's criteria implied that the national welfare state systems could be compromised to achieve budgetary discipline. This popular unease was well illustrated in the 2000 Danish and 2003 Swedish referenda that rejected the introduction of the euro as their official currency (Schmidtke 2004, 21; Dinan et al. 2017, 363). Schmidtke argues that in this background of uncertainty, the success of a variety of right-wing parties took place, based on a simplistic and populist form of protest (2004, 29). The right-wing populist rhetoric marked lines of division among a trustworthy nation state of 'people' and an untrustworthy

European undemocratically elected 'elite'. It also promoted anti-immigrant political propaganda, stoking fear over

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foreign and culturally different people, portraying them as potential terrorists or job takers, in other words as a threat to the purity and security of the nation state and its native population. However, as this was a period still dominated by mainstream media, with Euroscepticism being viewed as radical phenomenon rather than as a political reality, right-wing populism failed to gain a sufficient electorate.

The post-truth challenge becomes apparent following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. As the authority and trustworthiness of European institutions deteriorated, citizens were left wandering and in quest for emotionally fulfilling alternatives – i.e. 'truths'. Indeed, the financial shock was dealt on a functional rather than a political rationale, with the ECB's procedures, bailouts and macro-economic supervision forming the main premises of the EU and Eurozone responses (Dinan et al. 2017, 6; Hooghe and Marks 2019, 1119). As a result, tough austerity measures in debt-burdened countries led to unprecedented levels of unemployment, as well as economic and social unrest, further shaking citizens' confidence to the problem-solving capacities of the EU. The moment was ideal for populists to once again promote division between the 'elite' (European technocrats) and 'the people'. Their rhetoric was oversimplistic and emotional and lacked depth and analysis over the 'causes and consequences' of the crisis itself, as questions over political weaknesses of the EMU per se had not been detailed. The emergence of social media in the same period allowed populists to rapidly communicate their rhetoric to and from the public, thus reaching wider audiences across borders. As Lehne points out, 'the speed, superficiality and interactive nature of social media make them very well suited to spread populist ideas' (2017).

While the financial crisis was still unfolding, Europe was about to encounter a new challenge. The Arab Spring and the political and social turmoil and civil wars it unleashed across North Africa and the Middle East resulted in unpreceded flows of refugees and migrants to Europe. In 2015 alone, 1.8 million irregular border-crossings into the EU were registered (Weber 2019, 135; Buonno 2017, 101–102). Security and economic concerns soon surrounded the issue while disagreements over the reception, the relocation and the limiting of refugees rose among member states (Weber 2019, 153– 170). As a result, numerous states reinstalled border controls putting the free movement of people in the EU's Schengen area on hold – and in doing so challenging one of the Union's triumph projects. Moreover, key decisions, as with the EU-Turkey refugee deal, revealed a trend of intergovernmental bargaining with third countries as a response to crises, while neglecting any public consultation apparatus. Developments such as Frontex reinforcement through the creation of the European Coast and Board Guard and new hotspots could not undermine that trend (Schweiger 2017, 206; Webber 2019, 171). In many member states, the combination of the high importance of the migration issue together with widespread public dissatisfaction with the EU's management fuelled 'defensive nationalism' sentiments and cultural division. Thus, a fertile ground for the emergence of anti-EU, anti-refugee, and white supremacist parties was produced (Kriesi 2018, 38; Webber 2019, 172). As Hooghe and Marks put it 'the migration crisis touched a nerve of national identity' (2019, 1122). In 2016, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the elements of the Conservative Party in Britain advanced an anti-immigrant campaign that played a key role during Brexit. They endorsed the position that migrants were not only a threat to the nation's wellbeing and security, but also undermining to the national identity of local people (Outhwaite 2018; Mudde 2019, 125, 52; Coman et al. 2020, 22–23).

While during the 1900s and 2000s, right-wing populists had not achieved significant electoral results, having also failed to form a sole long-lasting European Parliament group, in the 2014 European elections they reached unprecedented power, with 73 out of the 751 elected Members of the European Parliament being radical right-wing populists (McDonnell and Werner 2019, 4). In 2015, they managed to form a coalition under the European of Nations and Freedom (ENF) group. Later, in the 2019 elections, the right-wing populist force appeared in even greater numbers, winning the majority of votes in Italy, France, Poland and Hungary (under the coalition of right-wing political party FIDESZ with the conservative Christian Democratic People's Party). On 8 April 2019, Salvini launched a far-right alliance aiming to form a powerful bloc at the European level, as will be discussed further in the next section. Under this prism, populism and Euroscepticism, in all their forms, no longer appeared as radical phenomena, but rather as a mainstreamed (Mudde 2019) political reality.

However, it was in the post-truth age that populist forces really managed to thrive and even form coalitions, further threatening democracy and the EU integration project itself. While in a regime of shared truth, political debates took place broadly within the framework of accepted values, norms and understandings – an array of emotional truths

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seem to predominate in the post-truth age. In the EU, the financial and the migrant crises accentuated public disappointment and reactions to the EU's structural flaws and further shook the trust on EU institutions. In this framework, populist right-wing parties managed to gain unconventional power, mobilising frustrated audiences around anti-EU, global elite conspiracies and nativism rhetoric. In this vein, social media provided an unlimited array of information that could be tailored according to people's beliefs and emotions (Bennett and Livingston 2021, Tumber and Waisbord 2021).

The Lega Nord case

Lega Nord was founded in 1991 by its charismatic leader Umberto Bossi, aiming at representing the interests of small and medium entrepreneurs of Northern Italy who felt undermined by the Italian political agenda. In this framework, the European Union represented its main ally against the Italian political elite. Thus, inspired by the neo-federalist theory of the Italian philosopher Gianfranco Miglio, Lega envisaged the foundation of an 'Europe of regions' based on economic liberalism and on the primacy of local autonomies over the State's sovereignty (Cento et al. 2001, 24–26; Tarchi 2015, 191–196). Moreover, the European identity complemented Lega's nativist discourse, symbolising the common values of the developed West against southern Italy's people, rhetorically identified with the Africans, that is, with the 'other' vis-à-vis modern and Western values and the European identity (Huysseune 2009, 66– 68). The party was originally a pro-EU and anti-statist party, fighting for regional autonomy. However, during the 21st century, Lega has revealed a 'chameleonic logic' (Mazzoleni and Ruzza 2021, 69) and has changed its political and ideological discourse several times. Indeed, during the early 2000s, it shifted from a pro-EU to a Eurosceptic position and then, during Salvini's leadership, from regionalism to nationalism. These metamorphoses have progressively led Lega Nord towards the right-wing populist party's family, until its full ideological convergence in 2013 (Albertazzi et al. 2018; Tarchi 2015).

To explain Lega's shift scholars have focused on both internal and external causes. However, there is general consensus on the role played by the implementation of the EMU and its effects on the Italian economy. Engendering inflation and increasing both European and extra European external competition, EMU deepened the fear of globalisation among small and medium-sized entrepreneurs of Northern Italy. Therefore, Lega merged its traditional liberalism with new protectionist arguments as regional self- government and administrative autonomy was required to protect Northern Italians and the Northern economy from globalisation. The shift to Euroscepticism came from the perception that European institutions had progressively taken a dirigiste attitude. Hence, Lega extended its traditional anti-statist speech to European institutions. Euroscepticism did not entail a radical change in Lega's ideological base. It remained a populist and ethno- regionalist party, mainly focused on protecting of Northern Italy's interests (McDonnell 2006). Thus, the shift to Euroscepticism responds to a 'survival strategy' for maintaining its traditional electorate in the new political context. The modest results obtained by Lega at the national political elections of 2001 (3.94% in the House of Representatives), contrasting with the results of the previous election of 1996 (10.07% in the House of Representatives; 10.41 in the Senate) illustrates well the minority framework of Euroscepticism in Italy at the time. In addition, the Eurosceptic rhetoric brought Lega closer to the ideology of right-wing European parties. However, in this context, anti-EU feelings did not lead to any strategy of 'alliance' of right-wing populists at a supranational level. In a political context still dominated by mainstream media and a broad consensus on EMU, right-wing populist discourses were marginal.

Lega's second shift from regionalism to nationalism during Salvini's leadership, and the new political alliance strategy with European right-wing populist parties, also derived both from internal and external causes. Nevertheless, it is impossible to fully understand this move without considering the post-truth context. The financial crisis and the refugee crisis made the regionalist discourse irrelevant, since European austerity politics affected both Northern and Southern Italy. Secondly, the European migration crisis, mainly affecting Southern Italy, displaced the 'us' against the 'others' context. Thus, all Italian people were now menaced by migration influxes. The strengthening of both Eurosceptic and xenophobic feelings of the Italian people represented a chance to revitalise Lega. In this regard, the anti- European rhetoric became dominant in Salvini's discourse. On the one hand, European technocratic elites, acting to protect their financial interests, threatened the Italian people and the democratic roots of the West. On the other hand, European migration politics led to multicultural societies which could destroy both the Italian and the European identity. In sum, under Salvini's rhetoric, the European Union represented the most dangerous enemy of

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the Italian and the European people, enforcing a radical change in the party's political agenda. In the domestic sphere, people across Italy had to overcome their historical divisions to build a national opposition to European politics and to the influx of refugees (Albertazzi et al. 2018; Mazzoleni and Ruzza 2021, 69–75). Internationally, the party had to work on an alliance with right-wing populist parties in Europe.

Albertazzi et al. (2018) show how the use of social media has succeeded in ensuring a key disjunction between the leader and the party's politics, exemplified by the duplication of the party's names. Although the party's name remained Lega Nord, it has participated in the last electoral appointments with different names: 'Noi con Salvini' for the Italian local elections of 2017, and simply 'Lega' for the Italian general election of 2018 and the European election of 2019. This duplication of names reflects the deepest division in the party's politics. While in Northern Italy local leaders have continued to develop a regionalist and autonomist discourse, Salvini, through social media, has built his new nationalistic and xenophobic rhetoric – and it is fully grounded in a post-truth logic (Rowinski 2021, 121–141).

Salvini's decision to heavily rely on social media – and his ability to do so effectively – also helps to explain why he could bring about such a profound ideological shift so quickly, without relying on any intermediaries (Albertazzi Giovannini and Seddone 2018, 652).

Based on permanent visibility and inflammatory rhetoric, Salvini has enriched different 'hate speeches', not founded in facts, against his many enemies – 'clandestini' (illegal migrants), European institutions, political elites and the public opinion. Through the use of social media he has accomplished a complex and successful communicational strategy, exploiting the fears and feelings of the Italian people for his own electoral goals. Thanks to the use of an algorithmic software called 'La Bestia' (The Beast), Lega's communication team has succeeded in quickly analysing followers' reactions and feelings, adjusting and organising the party's strategy according to their followers' interests and wishes (Cervi 2020). The creation in 2015 of Facebook Live was a further advantage for Salvini. As Cervi points out, Salvini typically records streamed videos with his smartphone, often in familiar locations and in informal attire, allowing followers to express live reactions or to ask questions. The everyday language used by Salvini enhances the feeling of solidarity and the illusion of proximity, blurring the barriers between the public and private sphere and giving followers the perception of an intimate connection with the leader. In addition, anyone who criticises the leader is regarded as the 'other' – a member of the 'elite', not the 'people'. Rowinski calls such behaviour a 'blind faith' to the leader (Rowinski 2021, 28).

Rowinski (2021, 149–150) uses discursive historical analysis to unravel the narrative of populist Euroscepticism and emotive rhetoric. Both are present in Salvini's rhetoric under two main terms: 'Europa' and 'immigrazione'. Under 'Europa', Salvini is perceived as the one who makes Europe tremble, but he is also perceived as a populist and a xenophobe. In a post-truth logic, his followers do not seem to consider the latter characteristics as flaws. Instead, they focus on Salvini as a feared leader resisting the European elite and putting Italy first. The term 'immigrazione' relates to nativist messages that have reinforced populist forces through videos, pictures and short messages broadcast on social media. For instance, during the peak of the migrant crisis (while serving as Interior Minister) he denied the entrance of rescue ships in Italian ports. On social media, Salvini spread xenophobic propaganda filled with selective stories, not based on data, about the rise of criminality and unemployment due to the inflow of refugees and uncontrolled influxes of migrants (Bulli 2021). A quick look at Lega's two last electoral results in the national general elections highlights Salvini's political success under a post-truth strategy. Thus, while in the election of 2013 Lega obtained a modest 4.09% of votes in the House of Representatives and 4.34% in the Senate – by 2018 they had reached 17.35% in the Chamber of Representatives and 17.61% in the Senate – becoming a party government in coalition with Movement Five Stars.

At the international level, Matteo Salvini stated that while the term populist was used as an insult, for him it was a compliment (Mudde 2019, 5). Indeed, under Salvini's rhetoric, the European Union represented the most dangerous enemy of the Italian and European people, and the party had to work in an alliance with other right-wing populist parties in Europe. Thus, Salvini became, together with Marine Le Pen, the main promoter of the creation of 'an international group of nationalists' (McDonnell and Werner 2019, 155) in the European Parliament. He argued that an alliance of all European right- wingers and soft Eurosceptic parties should fight against the European globalist and multiculturalist elites on the transnational issues of migration, European welfare and European identity (McDonnell

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and Werner 2019; Martinelli 2018). As McDonnell and Werner (2019) point out, this statement reveals a new attitude in European right-wing populist parties– the use of social media allowed to veer towards an 'offensive' perspective, based on fake news, hate speech and a permanent condemnation of the dictatorship of the mainstream media (Froio and Ganesh 2019). Essentially, social media has enabled radical right-wing parties to become mainstreamed and normalised as part of the right-wing family of soft Eurosceptic parties, fighting to save the European people, the European democracy and European values (McDonnell and Werner 2019, 149–155). In the European Election of 2019, Lega obtained 34.33% of votes, while in previous elections they had reached a modest 6.16%. Hence, they became the first party in Italy to join the new 'Identity and Democracy' grouping in the European Parliament.

Post-truth logic allowed Salvini to build a new personal ideology that was based on the communicational potentialities of social media. By improving the illusion of a strong proximity to the people and of a direct dialogue with his supporters, Salvini succeeded in exploring the malaise of Italian society and the feelings of distrust on the European institution to reach unprecedent electoral successes both at a national and European level. Yet, Salvini's communicational strategy also entails an 'empty nationalism' (Albertazzi et al. 2018, 646), rooted in a contradictory discourse which is unable to respond to political challenges. Therefore, it is impossible to conceal Northern Italy's requests for administrative autonomy with the South's welfare needs – or even to simultaneously protect the state's autonomy and Europeanism. Salvini's fall from office post-2019 suggests that such post-truth logic may only result in a brief and ephemeral political success. However, it is important to consider this example as part of a wider reflection on the wider rise of populism throughout Europe.

Further remarks

In the post-truth age, right-wing populist parties such as Lega Nord offered an array of unrestrained 'truths' and managed to purposely distort problems and solutions in order to gain popularity and power. Lega's case in Italy has demonstrated that successive European crises have provided a competitive advantage for right-wing populism to grow. In turn, social media further empowered Lega's leaders to propagate their populist rhetoric with no filter and no accountability. As proven by Lega's electoral success, right-wing populism has succeeded, at least to an extent, in undermining the European integration project. Moving to the present, the Covid-19 pandemic seems to have ushered in a new sense of European solidarity, if still fragile. Collaboration between supranational institutions and the member states has succeeded in controlling the social effects arising from the pandemic, including developing a common European vaccination plan. Concurrently, the European Recovery Fund for a digital and ecological transition appears to have helped relaunch the European integration project. European solidarity over the Russian invasion of Ukraine is also noteworthy. Nonetheless, the European Union has multiple challenges to overcome in order to strengthen public trust and deepen the feeling of belonging amongst the European population. Although further work (and the passage of time) is required to disentangle these complexities, recent developments may form an opportunity to revitalise the European project (suitably tailored to valid social and democratic concerns) against the right-wing populism and post-truth rhetoric as explored in this chapter.

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