

# The center-right in a search for unity and the re-emergence of the neo-fascist right

Elisabetta De Giorgi <sup>a</sup> and Filippo Tronconi <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Portuguese Institute of International Relations (IPRI), Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal;

<sup>b</sup>Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

## ABSTRACT

In 2017, the parties of the centre-right camp – Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia, Matteo Salvini’s (Northern) League and Giorgia Meloni’s Fratelli d’Italia – faced the puzzle of deciding whether to participate in the imminent general elections as allies or as rivals. On the one hand they had partially different aims (especially in relation to the European Union issue) and the problem of choosing the leadership of the alliance; on the other, the new electoral system, partially based on single-member districts, forced them to present common candidates in order to maximize their chances of reaching a majority of seats in parliament. In this article, we outline the stages through which the centre-right parties attempted to solve this puzzle over the course of the year, finally reaching an agreement to make a formal electoral alliance. In the final section of the article, we focus on one additional political actor of the right wing: the neo-fascist movements, notably Forza Nuova and CasaPound, which received significant media coverage during 2017. We describe how these movements were able to gain center stage and what this implied for the mainstream centre-right parties.

In a way, the year 2017 began for the center-right on January 21 in Koblenz. On that date the leaders of the main extreme right parties in Europe came together in the German city for an event showcasing the visions and political aims that they shared. For Marine Le Pen (Front National, France), Geert Wilders (Partij voor de Vrijheid, Netherlands), Frauke Petry (Alternative für Deutschland, Germany) and Matteo Salvini (Lega Nord) 2016 had ended with the unexpected victory of Donald Trump in the U.S. presidential elections, as well as the victory for Brexit in the referendum held in the UK in June. With important elections coming up (presidential and legislative elections in France, and parliamentary elections in the Netherlands, Germany and then in Italy), the neo-populist parties of the right had high expectations. From the stage in Koblenz, Wilders had summarized these expectations in one slogan: ‘Yesterday a new America, today Koblenz, tomorrow a new Europe.’<sup>1</sup> Salvini echoed these sentiments when clarifying what the new Europe would look like: ‘We all know that the euro experiment has been a failure and a crime. So as statesmen we have to prepare for the post-euro scenario (...). The sooner we leave the euro, the better it will be for everyone.’<sup>2</sup>

Almost twelve months later, the year came to a close with a surprising statement from Bill Emmott, ex-Editor-in-Chief of the *Economist*: ‘If his [Berlusconi’s] center-right coalition wins a majority, he will directly choose the prime minister; more likely, he will be the key player in negotiations over a grand coalition government of center-right and center-left parties. Most remarkable of all, either scenario would be widely regarded as a stable and respectable outcome, compared to the most likely alternative: a minority government led by M5S.’<sup>3</sup> Emmott, who in 2001 had stated that Berlusconi was ‘unfit to lead Italy’, now saw him as a wise leader and his coalition as a bastion against the advances of the populists.<sup>4</sup>

The year of the center-right can be bracketed between these two extremes. On the one hand there was the League attempting to complete the process of redefining its own identity by moving away from seeking independence for the North, positioning itself on the extreme right, and giving prominence to anti-immigration and anti-euro policies, with the ambition of expanding its support in the central and southern areas of the country (Vampa 2017). On the other hand, Silvio Berlusconi was building a moderate and trustworthy image for himself and for his party, which was surely destined to be the key player in any post-election alliance. In between these extremes we find Fratelli d’Italia, the small party led by Giorgia Meloni, that was successful in attracting the votes of the nostalgic supporters of the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (Italian Social Movement). As we shall see, to the right of these ‘institutional’ parties, some neo-fascist factions also re-emerged, represented by two groups outside Parliament – Forza Nuova and CasaPound – which were (surprisingly and worryingly) given considerable media coverage in the second half of 2017.

The three center-right parties and their leaders would have good reasons to run on their own ticket: the risk was that moderates could take votes from the ‘sovereignists’ and the sovereignists from the moderates. Nevertheless, the drop in support for the PD (and the split in the group to its left) and the isolationist line taken by the M5S gave the center-right a plausible chance of competing, or even running as the favorites, in the 2018 elections. With the electoral system adopted in the autumn, which allows for some of the seats in single-member constituencies to be awarded on a first-past-the-post basis, it is of paramount importance to set aside differences and to present a common political program, and above all, candidates with shared support. Another complicated issue involved the leadership of the coalition: Salvini had long held an ambition to undermine the now 80-year-old Berlusconi (Raniolo 2016), but Berlusconi seemed to have no intention of stepping aside, even though he was banned from taking public office after being found guilty of tax fraud in 2013.

In the pages that follow we shall outline the stages through which the center-right parties attempted to solve this puzzle over the course of 2017. We shall consider the strategies that the three parties adopted in order to secure the leadership of the alliance (section 1) and to carve out a recognizable political space within it (section 2); the positions they took on the main issues on the political agenda (section 3); and the re-emergence of neo-fascist right fringe groups, which constituted both a danger for the mainstream parties yet at the same time the chance of a possible breakthrough into a new electoral market (section 4).

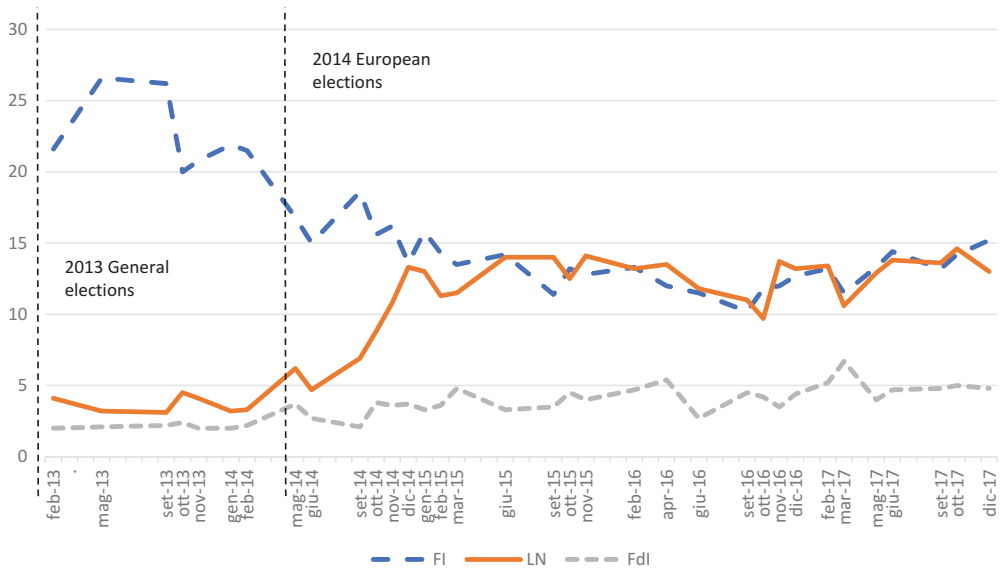
## 1. The issue of the leadership of the center-right

The municipal elections of June 2016 brought a renewed sense of optimism within the ranks of the center-right, thanks to the result obtained in Milan, where a credible candidate, Stefano Parisi, had come very close to a surprise victory in the run-off against Giuseppe Sala. Above all, the 2016 elections had shown that the center-right could only be competitive if it was united, as it was in Milan; on the other hand, in places where Forza Italia and the League put forward competing candidates, as was the case in Rome, defeat was inevitable (Emanuele and Maggini 2017). The 2017 municipal elections, along with the regional elections in Sicily, provided further proof that the center-right could compete strongly. In the June municipal elections, the center-right had gained control of 49 councils in towns with over 15,000 inhabitants, compared with 51 for the center-left. This was virtually a draw, but in reality it concealed the significant inroads made by the conservative coalition, given that the coalition won ten more local elections compared with five years earlier, while the center-left lost 25 elections. The remaining elections were won by either civic lists or the *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S, Five Star Movement). If we look beyond the bare figures, the success of the center-right was boosted by some ‘historic’ victories in cities traditionally run by the left, such as Genoa, La Spezia and Pistoia (Emanuele and Paparo 2017). In the November 5th elections in Sicily, Nello Musumeci went on to achieve a clear victory over the M5S candidate, with twice the number of votes obtained by the Partito Democratico (PD, Democratic Party) candidate. The Sicilian elections thus marked an important stage in the coming together of the three center-right parties, which presented a united front in their support for Musumeci, thus regaining control of a traditionally conservative region, after the interlude during which it was run by a leftist government led by Rosario Crocetta.

While it is always difficult to draw any general conclusions from local election results, during the course of the year it became clear that the center-right parties had the wind in their sails and that a coalition made up of Forza Italia (FI), the League and Fratelli d’Italia (FdI) would have a genuine chance of winning the parliamentary elections and possibly of gaining an absolute majority of seats, all of which seemed most improbable for their main opponents.<sup>5</sup>

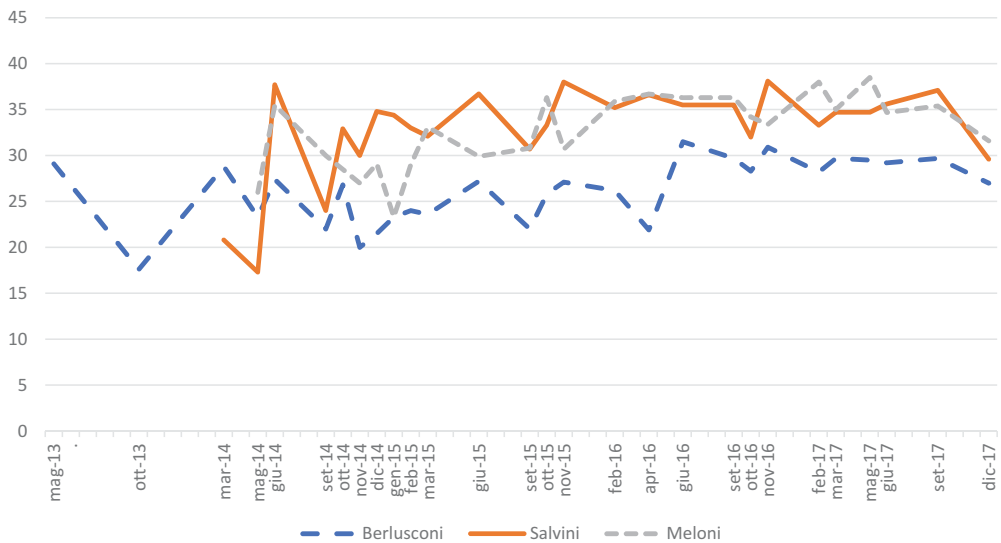
There were also some encouraging signs in opinion polls. Whereas in the autumn of 2016 the number of those intending to vote for the three center-right parties was only just over 25 percent, this figure reached and remained stable at over 30 percent in the second half of 2017, reaching its highest point of 33.8 percent in October (Figure 1). Moreover, since the last months of 2014 the League had bridged the gap with Forza Italia, which was still around 10 percent in the European elections in May. This can certainly be attributed to the leadership of Matteo Salvini and to the radical changes of the party’s political line that he introduced. At the same time, the difficulties of Silvio Berlusconi, who was serving time for his conviction, doing voluntary service in a center for the elderly just outside Milan, also had an influence to bear. Nevertheless, from the beginning of 2015 the power relations between the two parties stabilized, as shown in opinion polls, leaving the leadership issue of the (possible future) coalition unresolved.

On a personal level, Salvini appears to be a more consistently preferred leader compared to Berlusconi (Figure 2), hence his claim to take on the role of leader of the center-right coalition should the League succeed in gaining more votes than Forza Italia (particularly given that,



**Figure 1.** Voting intentions for the three center-right parties (2013–2017).

Source: Demos & Pi ([www.demos.it](http://www.demos.it))



**Figure 2.** Approval ratings for the center-right leaders (2013–2017).

Note: the graph shows the percentages of those responding to the question: ‘On a scale of 1 to 10, what mark would you give to ...’ (only responses of 6 or higher).

Source: Demos & Pi ([www.demos.it](http://www.demos.it))

following his conviction in 2013, the FI leader is banned from holding public office until 2019). On the other hand, Berlusconi frequently claimed over the course of the year that he was the historic father of Italy’s center-right and thus, in his opinion, in a position to appoint the candidate for the role of prime minister.<sup>6</sup>

The third center-right party, Brothers of Italy, can rely only on a smaller potential support base – which during 2017 settled at around 5 percent – but which is not irrelevant. Indeed it may prove to be decisive in the contest with the center-left and with the 5-Star Movement. Also the personal approval ratings for Giorgia Meloni were consistently higher than Berlusconi's, and they were usually close to or higher than Salvini's (Figure 2). These ratings certainly reflect the huge media exposure given to the FdI secretary over the course of the year and her skills as a communicator, especially on television. But given the balance of power between the three parties, the possibility of her being a candidate for the leadership of the coalition was never under consideration.

## 2. Three rivals in search of an alliance

With the approach of parliamentary elections, the center-right seemed to be in a position to compete. Furthermore, the introduction of the new electoral law, with a significant number of seats being awarded in single-member constituencies (around 37 percent of the total), made alliance-building indispensable. If this did not take place, the candidates of the three parties running against each other would end up giving an advantage to their opponents. This created a dilemma for the three parties, especially for the two larger ones: on the one hand, it was necessary to find agreement on the main policies in the electoral manifesto and some form of collaboration given the need for single candidates who could gain the support of voters from all three parties; on the other hand, the three parties were seeking to secure the votes from a support base with partially overlapping allegiances. Consequently the parties needed to distinguish themselves from their allies/rivals to carve out a recognizable political space for themselves within the alliance. Let us look, then, at the strategies adopted by each party.

In 2017 the League completed the process of redefining its own image and its positioning on the Italian political spectrum, which began when Salvini was elected as its secretary (Vampa 2017). The main change consisted in the attempt to make further inroads in the southern regions. To achieve this, the traditional reference to the north was deleted from the party symbol in October, and the name of the party itself was changed to the League. This was a huge step for a party whose success in elections had been due to its demands for autonomy, or outright secession, of 'Padania' from the rest of Italy. Even the secretary himself, Salvini, had frequently come under criticism for his insults against the southerners, whose votes he now sought to attract. Already in the municipal elections in 2016 and in 2017, the 'Noi con Salvini' lists had presented candidates in the southern regions, without achieving stunning results. But there were some encouraging signs, such as the 2.4 percent in the 2015 regional elections in Puglia or the 2.7 percent in the 2016 Rome council elections. Although it was not openly challenged, this transformation was not without consequences inside the party.

In an effort to put the regionalist issue back at the center of the League's political program, the two presidents of the Veneto and Lombardy regions, Luca Zaia and Roberto Maroni, put forward a referendum calling for autonomy for their respective regions, which was held simultaneously on October 22.<sup>7</sup> The result of this referendum would not be binding in any way, nor would it have immediate political consequences. As expected, the outcome was a strong 'Yes' response to the question, but the focus of public debate was soon to move elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> From a technical point of view it was

a consultative referendum, in which citizens were asked to give a mandate to negotiate with the government in Rome to obtain ‘other forms and special conditions for autonomy,’ as set out in Article 116 of the Constitution. The political significance of the referendum, however, was obvious. Zaia and Maroni, two leading figures inside the party, did not want to follow the secretary’s political line, and they were putting on the table the electoral and symbolic importance of the regions where the League had originated and gained its greatest successes. This came at a time when regional tensions were coming to the fore again in Europe as a result of the secessionist movement in Catalonia.

A few weeks earlier (on September 17) the League’s traditional annual rally was held in Pontida, where the party decides on its strategies and spreads its buzzwords to members and sympathizers. For the first time since 1990, the founder Umberto Bossi was not invited to speak from the stage, while the secretary (with the huge slogan ‘Salvini premier’ displayed behind him) gave a speech focusing on his opposition to Turkey joining the EU, on security, on the abolition of the Fornero law (which raised the pension age threshold), on the precarious jobs encouraged by the Jobs Act, and on the vaccinations made compulsory by the government, which in his view put children’s health at risk. However, there was no reference to the traditional themes of federalism or autonomy for the North. In spite of the referendum results and the doubts of some of the traditional members of the party executive, Salvini’s leadership and his strategic vision appeared to go unchallenged.

While Salvini’s rise in the League has been a recent event, the leadership issue in Forza Italia has never been under debate; from its very foundation in 1994, Forza Italia has in fact been described as a typical example of a personal party (Calise 2000; Gunther and Diamond 2003; Raniolo 2006; McDonnell 2013). Silvio Berlusconi has always been its universally recognized leader and he has always had total control over the party and over all its decision-making processes, not just when it was founded, but from that time onwards. In 2007 he decided, unilaterally and with no sign of any internal debate, to dissolve the party and to found a new one (Pdl – Popolo della Libertà) which was to include within it the historic allies of Alleanza Nazionale; in 2013, a similar unilateral decision was taken to reconstruct Forza Italia. The party’s national election campaigns (and frequently the local ones too) have always focused on Berlusconi as its head, his successes in the worlds of business and politics, on the superior nature of his leadership, and even on the flaunting of his body (Belpoliti 2011) or at least on his unparalleled physical stamina. In 2017 all this could have constituted a risk factor. As mentioned earlier, in fact, Berlusconi would not be able to hold public office until 2019, so he could not stand as a candidate in the parliamentary elections, due to the conviction he received in 2013. Of course, the old leader could still run the election campaign; however, the best prospect for the post-election stage for Berlusconi was to have a key role in the selection of one of his henchmen as leader of a possible center-right government. It was out of the question for him to take on the role of prime minister. The biggest risk, from his point of view, was that a young leader like Salvini or Meloni might take his place as leader of the coalition, thereby precipitating the irreversible generational change that Berlusconi had always tried to delay. These real difficulties go some way in explaining why the ex-Cavaliere kept shifting his position on the future leadership of the coalition. At different times, Berlusconi explicitly suggested that

a figure such as Sergio Marchionne, CEO of the automobile giant FCA (July 2017), or Leonardo Gallitelli, Commander-in-Chief of the Carabinieri (November), might lead a future government with the support of Forza Italia. On other occasions, he seemed to opt for Antonio Tajani, ex-EU Commissioner and currently president of the European Parliament, as a possibility in a public demonstration held, significantly, on the same day in which the League was assembling in Pontida with the slogan ‘Salvini premier.’<sup>9</sup> In December, when taking part in a book presentation, Berlusconi at last seemed to also consider providing support for a possible government led by the prime minister in office, Paolo Gentiloni, of the PD.<sup>10</sup>

The possibility of a parliament with no clear majority, indeed, gave rise to the prospect of a broadly-based government from which the League and FdI would obviously be excluded. During the course of 2017, Forza Italia persisted in its efforts to build a moderate, liberal image, as opposed to the ‘sovereignist’ image of its two allies. Berlusconi emphasized on several occasions the links between his party and the European People’s Party, and he consistently used conciliatory language when talking about the European Union. Unlike the other center-right leaders, the issue of immigration was never highlighted in his public pronouncements, whereas he gave greater attention to issues concerning taxation, business and the constraints imposed by public bureaucracy, as we shall see in greater detail in the next section. For now, we need to remember that this strategy, the aim of which was to position Forza Italia closer to the center of the political spectrum, also served to maintain a competitive advantage over its allies. While the League and FdI had no alternative but to create a center-right government, Berlusconi was at pains to keep the possibility of a future alliance with the rivals of the PD open. Taking credit as a moderate leader gave him a pivotal position in the party system, and this was even recognized by his fiercest opponents, as we saw at the beginning of this article with the surprising quotation from Bill Emmott.

Inside the center-right coalition, the role of FdI appears to be the most marginal one. FdI was created after it broke away from *Popolo della Libertà* (People of Liberty) at the end of 2012. It attracted many members of the post-fascist Italian right, previously active in *Alleanza Nazionale* (National Alliance), and before that in the Italian Social Movement. Its ideological roots and the personal history of many of its members and leading figures made this party the natural heir of the conservative right tradition because of the issues that it most often draws public attention to: security, intransigent opposition to ‘ius soli,’ defence of Christian values and traditions, and opposition to civil partnerships for homosexual couples. Of course there are also nostalgic reminders of the twenty years of Italian fascism, but the image of a young female leader and the attention given to current issues such as immigration have allowed the party to be rejuvenated and to some degree to ‘normalize’ this cultural and political heritage, making it acceptable within the institutions. At the same time, the party has continued to attract the older generation of ex-MSI voters, because the historic experience of fascism has not been explicitly repudiated. Indeed, while it has never been defended in an uncritical way, its symbolic significance has frequently been alluded to.<sup>11</sup> There is no argument over the leadership of the party: Meloni is by far the most popular figure, as testified by the approval ratings she receives (cfr. [Figure 2](#) above). Her role within the coalition is also clearly defined. FdI cannot compete with Forza Italia or the League in terms of voting percentages nor can it realistically aspire to move outside the

boundaries of the center-right coalition. At the same time, what it brings in terms of votes is not negligible, indeed its support could be decisive in many single-seat constituencies. As a result, Meloni has managed to obtain recognition for her party from the other two leaders as a fully-fledged component of the coalition, and a role for herself as mediator between Salvini and Berlusconi; however, at the moment she is precluded from taking on the role of leader of the coalition.

### 3. The issues

If we examine the most pressing issues for the center-right parties in 2017, the *déjà vu* feeling that many voters felt when Forza Italia, the League and Fratelli d'Italia joined forces again shows no signs of going away. Indeed, the alliance takes us back to 1994 (and also to 2001 of course), albeit with a few name changes as the Alleanza Nazionale no longer exists, but in its place we have Fratelli d'Italia. As we have also seen, only Silvio Berlusconi is still at the helm of his party, while the League and FdI have new secretaries. It is also true that the issues tackled by the three parties over the course of the year, which then turned into manifesto commitments during the campaign for the 2018 elections, have an evergreen<sup>12</sup> but updated feel about them in considering tax reform, pensions, security.

As far as tax reform is concerned, Berlusconi's main policies were still the introduction of the so-called 'flat tax' – i.e. the levelling out of taxes to one single rate (theoretically an advantageous one) for everyone, without taking into account different income levels – and a general cut in taxation, including the scrapping of the tax on people's first home and first car, as well as on charity donations and inheritance. The three center-right leaders have always appeared to be in agreement on these points. Tax reform has become 'a revolution' in Salvini's words, but his policies were not far removed from Forza Italia's: he also argued that the 'flat tax' was of fundamental importance, as it would help to fight tax evasion by persuading even the least honest taxpayers to pay their share, along the lines of the motto 'If people pay less, they will all pay.' As for how the government would fund this initiative, Salvini's solution is fiscal federalism and the easing of austerity measures imposed by the European Union to tackle public debt. Amongst the League's objectives in government, in fact, at least initially, there was the elimination of the fiscal contract and of the stability pact.<sup>13</sup>

On the subject of Europe, Salvini accused Brussels in a tweet posted on December 10 of having imposed 'the Bolkestein, the Fornero law, the directive on banks and the invasion of clandestine immigrants'. Another of the League's non-negotiable aims would therefore be to carry out a complete review of Italy's position in Europe. However, it is important to remember that, on this question, Salvini toned down his statements considerably over the course of 2017. As national elections approached, with the need to strengthen alliances, he actually revisited his most radical positions on the euro and on the European Union. It fell to the League's economic spokesman, Claudio Borghi, to explain in November, that 'Matteo has used more moderate language because the international situation has changed and because we need to form an alliance with Forza Italia'. Consequently, the debate for the more controversial issues has been deferred to some future date because it seems 'pointless escalating the debate,'<sup>14</sup> in the light of general elections in 2018. Some of



the League's decisions on this were probably also influenced by the results of the French presidential elections in 2017 over the course of the year. Emmanuel Macron's victory over Marine Le Pen exposed the limits of an over-emphasis on identity in a society which, also as a result of the process of European integration, no longer has one single identity. Similarly, the difficulties experienced by the UK government in achieving Brexit have shown that leaving the EU brings more risks than opportunities, at least in the short term. The League, which until then had threatened to break ranks with Berlusconi if Forza Italia continued to be against leaving the euro, had to therefore put the brakes on its own sovereigntist mission, by softening its statements on this issue, from leaving the euro, seen as a priority at the Koblenz assembly on January 21, to the 'last chance' given to the European Union in the speech given at the Pontida rally on September 17.<sup>15</sup>

While Salvini found himself forced to revisit some of his policies on Europe, he succeeded in getting his way over his allies on another issue dear to the League: the issue of pensions, in particular the Fornero law, which had often been criticized in the past. There were contrasting opinions on this, too, within the center-right. In fact, Salvini had always stated that the repeal of the law passed in 2012 (when Monti was leading the government) was among the main aims of the League once it was in government; Berlusconi and Meloni, however even just a few months before the elections, had taken a more cautious and even a favorable position towards an amended law rather than a repeal of it. But at the beginning of the new year, once the pact between the three allies had been officially signed and sealed, the scrapping of the reform on pensions was effectively inserted into the center-right's shared program,<sup>16</sup> thereby yielding to pressure from Salvini.

Finally, the last but not the least significant issue, security, is delicately linked to the problem of the reception of refugees and more general policies related to immigration, and it has certainly been one of fundamental importance for the center-right, particularly for the League and Fratelli d'Italia, throughout 2017 (and beyond). Both Salvini and Meloni have stated that the issue has become above all about combating illegal immigration and, at the same time, an effort to reclaim the values of 'Italianness': this is a kind of banner for the League and Fratelli d'Italia, which have adopted slogans, using them on social media and elsewhere, such as 'Italians first' and 'Put a stop to the invasion,' and have fought a battle against the draft law on 'ius soli,' with these two center-right parties and their leaders always in the front line. This campaign culminated in the demonstration organized by Salvini in Rome on December 10. It was a kind of end-of-year rally, given that 2017 was underway with a similar event led by Salvini and Meloni, entitled 'Sovereign Italy,' with the support of some members of Forza Italia, such as Renato Brunetta and Giovanni Toti. The declared aims of the organizers were as follows: immediate elections, no to the euro, and an end to uncontrolled immigration. So as far as the League and FdI were concerned, 2017 came to a close with the sound of many slogans similar to those at the start of the year. These were issues of security, the struggle against illegal immigration, and the defence of Italian identity, whereas the statements made on the euro and the European Union were more moderate, reflecting their efforts to accommodate the views of Forza Italia, which was considerably less Euro-skeptic than its two allies.

Now that we have completed this outline, we can say that Berlusconi has managed to persuade his allies to tone down their rhetoric on European integration, albeit without openly berating them; indeed, it was Forza Italia itself that began to take a harder line on immigration over the course of 2017. As a result of these adjustments, the three parties were able to show that they had reached a reasonable degree of harmony by the end of the year.

Another issue that became somewhat thorny during the course of the year concerned the position taken by the center-right parties on the re-emergence of neo-fascist groups in Italy. The slogans used by the League and Fratelli d'Italia on immigration and on Europe and the prominence given to these issues are not very far removed from those of the extreme right (Koopmans et al. 2005; Koopmans and Statham 2010) which, as we shall see in the next section, experienced a surprising boost in 2017, both in Italy and in many other European countries. 'Italy for the Italians' and 'Take back our sovereignty,' for example, are some of the battle cries used by CasaPound which may just as well have been coined by the parties led by Salvini and Meloni. Moreover, as early as 2015, Simone Di Stefano, the leader of CasaPound, had stated that his party could certainly have a dialogue with the League, as it shared many of its ideas: 'From "No" to the euro to migrants, from "Italians first" to a vigilant attitude towards the East, and the criticisms of the West for refusing to talk to Assad.'<sup>17</sup>

#### **4. The re-emergence of the neo-fascist right and its relations with the parliamentary right**

Which were the most talked about extreme right groups in Italy in 2017? First of all, let us provide a broader explanation. Most academics now agree on a definition of the 'extreme right' based on the key ideas of populism, nativism and authoritarianism (Mudde 2007). The movements and parties belonging to the recent radical right wave share the populist vision which sees society as divided into two homogeneous and opposing groups: the people, who are pure by definition, and the corrupt élites (Betz 1994; Mudde 2004; Taggart 2000). Furthermore, states should be lived in exclusively by native inhabitants, since foreigners and their ideas and cultures represent a threat to the homogeneity of the national state (Minkenberg 1998). Finally, society should be strictly ordered on the basis of the principle of authority.

The two main groups in Italy which openly claim to be extreme right are Forza Nuova and CasaPound. While they are often associated with one another, they are in fact two very different groups. Forza Nuova (FN) is a political movement founded in 1997 by Massimo Morsello and Roberto Fiore. Fiore is still the movement's leader to this day, having returned to Italy in 1999 after being a fugitive in the UK from 1980. He had been convicted on charges of conspiracy and belonging to an armed group when he was head of Terza Posizione,<sup>18</sup> but he was able to go back to Italy when the statute of limitations for his crimes expired. Over the years a movement was created based on an eight-point plan 'for national rebuilding': repeal of the law on abortion; family and demographic growth at the center of the policy for national recovery; a halt to immigration and the launch of a humane repatriation program; a ban on freemasonry and secret sects; the eradication of loan sharks and the cancellation of public debt; restoration of the 1929 State-Church concordat; repeal of the Mancino and Scelba

laws<sup>19</sup>; the creation of corporations in defence of workers and of the national community.<sup>20</sup> During the years when Berlusconi was leading the government, Forza Nuova agreed on electoral alliances with the center-right, with fluctuating results; in 2008 Fiore managed to get elected to the European parliament, occupying the seat vacated by Alessandra Mussolini. Meanwhile, outside the institutions, the movement's grassroots continued to employ the type of violence typical of extreme right extra-parliamentary groups, but in the absence of proven links with the leadership of the movement, Fiore always succeeded in staying in the clear.

At the end of 2017 (on 6 December), some FN militants went into action outside the offices of *l'Espresso* and *la Repubblica*, with their faces masked, carrying smoke bombs and black flags, leaving behind an FN banner and a placard reading 'Boycott Repubblica and L'Espresso'. The group then took responsibility for this action on Facebook. The communiqué read as follows: 'We turned up like that because today we represent every Italian betrayed by those who write in favor of "ius soli," the invasion of immigrants and ethnic mixing ... Today's was just the "first attack" on those who spread pro-immigration propaganda, serve the interests of NGOs, cooperatives and various mafias ... Today the defence of patriots got under way against the poison of these terrorists disguised as journalists. These infamous people need to understand that we shall not leave them alone, we will challenge them everywhere.'<sup>21</sup> The blitz took place just a few days after the one carried out in Como on November 29 by a group of 'skinheads' who broke into the office of an organization working for migrants, disrupting the meeting of the network of associations known as *Como senza frontiere* (Como without borders) to read out a statement. The scene was filmed and later posted on social media by the perpetrators themselves.

It was in this context that the actions of CasaPound occurred. As we have said, this organization differs in many ways from Forza Nuova. First of all, its origins: CasaPound did not see itself initially as a party, but it was created in Rome in 2003 as 'the first fascist-inspired social center.' It modelled itself on the Greek association Golden Dawn. It was a 'small neo-nazi movement springing up among the hooligans of Athens, a tiny group with a minority vocation trying out a strategy aimed at penetrating into popular classes, taking action against immigrants, against small tradespeople and supporting popular classes.'<sup>22</sup> Later, CasaPound branched out beyond the confines of Rome and set itself up in 2008 as a political movement, with a program whose main points were nationalizing the banks and some large industries, closing the borders to stop illegal immigrants getting in, closing the European trading area, monetary sovereignty, and social mortgages to support home ownership. These were almost all issues with a strong social imprint.<sup>23</sup>

In November 2017, CasaPound and its leader, Simone Di Stefano, came to the forefront of the national media as a result of events in Ostia, when municipal elections there produced a surprising increase in support for Di Stefano's party, which gained 9.1 percent of the votes. As Ostia has 230,000 inhabitants, it has the status of an average-size Italian city, and the result obtained by CasaPound far exceeded all expectations and all previous election results. In the days following this success, the press also gave considerable coverage to CasaPound because of another news event. On 9 November 2017, two RAI journalists were physically attacked by Roberto Spada, a boxer and the owner of a popular gym in Nuova Ostia and the brother of mafia boss

Carmine Spada. Roberto Spada was not active in any extreme right wing groups, and the Casapound leaders denied any links with him after the attack, but the newspapers provided multiple evidence to show that the Spada family supported some local members of the neo-fascist group. Even if we look beyond this particular episode, many activists and students from the tenth municipality in Rome had already reported a climate of violence and intimidation in the area, which had long been ignored by the media and institutions. Casa Pound's electoral success in Ostia and the group's relations with the Spada clan brought a new situation to the attention of national public opinion, and one that had up to then been virtually unknown: CasaPound had taken root in the country and this brought the risk that, in the 2018 political elections, for the first time, the leaders of an openly declared fascist party would have an opportunity to gain seats in parliament: 'The election campaign fought by CasaPound, which begins even before the ministry of the Interior sets the date for the vote, is based on three main action points: raids against illegal occupations, from immigrants on the beaches to Roma selling goods in temporary market stalls set up in the streets, anti-eviction pickets, obviously for Italian tenants/occupants. Finally, their main weapon: the collection of groceries for 250 families in Ostia, but only Italian families.'<sup>24</sup>

While the use of violence by two extreme right groups was apparently condemned by the parties led by Salvini and Meloni, both the League and Fratelli d'Italia often justified episodes of racism and xenophobia that took place during the course of 2017, placing the blame ultimately on the various governments in office over recent years and the decisions they took on immigration. After a group of skinheads broke into the office of a pro-migrant association in Como, for example, Salvini declared: 'It is not polite to go uninvited into someone else's home, but the issue of the invasion of migrants highlighted by the skinheads is clear for all to see.'<sup>25</sup> Only a month earlier, Salvini had kept a distance from CasaPound after the very serious attack by Roberto Spada on the RAI journalists in Ostia. He stated 'I am pleased that at last the State is showing some signs of life: whoever beats someone up or uses a club to bludgeon someone should go to jail.'<sup>26</sup> In other words, the strategy seems to involve coming down on one side of the fence – condemning the most serious incidents – and then on the other – showing that the reasons behind even violent behavior are understandable. These contradictory signals do not help so much to build alliances as to attract the most extreme voters, sympathizers of FN and CasaPound and to support their 'battles,' with the political elections around the corner.

## 5. Conclusions

During the course of 2017 the three center-right parties moved closer together in terms of their actions and their approaches to issues, with the prospect of also forging a formal alliance to be fine-tuned for the 2018 parliamentary elections. As we have seen, the issues that they focused on when communicating their ideas were concerned with taxation and pensions, immigration and security, and their attitude towards the European Union. On all these matters, the distance between their respective positions had narrowed considerably compared to the early part of 2017. Toward the end of the year, they were taking a more moderate line on the EU and they adopted a more radical tone when outlining their proposals for tackling other issues. The successful

results obtained in the November elections in Sicily helped to strengthen the prospects for a unified bloc. The approval of the new electoral law for the Chamber and the Senate in October also seemed to push the parties in the same direction. The reintroduction of single candidate seats, albeit only for a minority of the total number of seats, provided an incentive for parties that were ideologically close to coordinate their strategies.

The prospects for the center-right appear to be encouraging, especially given a situation in which the center-left is divided and the 5-Star Movement has maintained its stance of refusing to enter into any possible alliance, at least until parliamentary elections are held on 4 March 2018. Nevertheless, in spite of these positive developments, there are still a number of unanswered questions as we approach the end of 2017. We have outlined at least three of these in the preceding pages. First of all, there is the unresolved issue of the leadership. Berlusconi has yet again moved back under the spotlight on the political stage, in spite of his age and his problems with the judiciary, taking on the role of alliance-builder for the center-right parties, a role for which there appears to be no replacement. At the same time, his authority has been questioned more than ever before, and time is on the side of his younger rivals. Dissatisfaction on his running of the coalition has surfaced frequently over the course of the year, but in the end this was put to one side given the need to find an agreement in view of the impending elections. However it may well resurface on the day after the vote has taken place.

Secondly, but following on from the previous point, the different strategic ambitions of the parties may re-emerge in 2018 and lay bare the fragility of the alliance. If we rule out any improbable twist as the drama unfolds, the League and FdI seem to be stuck with Forza Italia in the political space occupied by the coalition. FI, on the other hand, might be able to operate on several fronts, exploiting its newfound central position in the political system. Much will depend on the election results, but it is not unthinkable that a grand coalition may be under consideration again, with Forza Italia taking a leading role and the League and FdI relegated to the opposition. The very fact that this possibility exists has enabled Berlusconi to negotiate with his allies from a position of strength.

Thirdly, significant differences of opinion on important issues may re-emerge, particularly on Europe. As we have seen, Meloni and Salvini have softened their positions on Europe, for various reasons. Some are related to internal factors and others to international ones. But in a different context, the conflict between sovereignists and (more or less convinced) pro-Europeans could turn out to be the weak point in the center-right alliance.

Finally, the resurgence of the extreme right represents a new reality and a possible source of danger but also of opportunity, especially for the League and FdI. The importance (only in terms of media coverage for the time being) of political groups that until now have been marginalized suggests that there is a growing electoral pool into which the mainstream parties might be able to reach. However the new competitors on the political scene might pull consensus away from the center-right parties or restrict their room for maneuver. And all this exists without even considering the serious questions and concerns that the legitimization of these political groups must raise about the state of health of Italian democracy.

*Translated by David Bull*

## Notes

1. Tonia Mastrobuoni: “A Coblenza vertice dei partiti della destra europei: ‘Cacciare le Merkel, gli Hollande, i Renzi’, in *La Repubblica*, 21 January 2017 [http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2017/01/21/news/a\\_cobleza\\_vertice\\_dei\\_partiti\\_della\\_destra\\_europei\\_cacciare\\_le\\_merkel\\_gli\\_hollande\\_i\\_renzi\\_-156549446/](http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2017/01/21/news/a_cobleza_vertice_dei_partiti_della_destra_europei_cacciare_le_merkel_gli_hollande_i_renzi_-156549446/).
2. Matteo Salvini’s speech in Koblenz can be accessed on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dT5OXy7efs>.
3. Bill Emmott: ‘The Bunga-Bunga Party Returns to Italy’, in *Project Syndicate*, 4 January 2018. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/italy-election-berlusconi-comeback-by-bill-emcott-2018-01>.
4. In a not dissimilar way, a few weeks before the founder of *la Repubblica* Eugenio Scalfari had stated in a TV interview that he would choose Berlusconi over Di Maio as the person to lead the government. Cfr. Gisella Ruccia: ‘Scalfari: “Tra Berlusconi e Di Maio scelgo il primo. Renzi? È il mio “nipotino”’, in *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 22 November 2017 <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2017/11/22/scalfari-tra-berlusconi-e-di-maio-scelgo-il-primo-renzi-e-il-mio-nipotino/3993429/>.
5. R. D’Alimonte: ‘Berlusconi snodo obbligato negli scenari del dopo voto’, in *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 10 December 2017. <https://cise.luiss.it/cise/2017/12/10/berlusconi-snodo-obbligato-negli-scenari-del-dopo-voto/>.
6. This is what Berlusconi declared, for example, at a public event in September 2017: ‘I say to the League that we will always respect their ideas, but they need to remember that it is we that created the center-right and we have always had the leader to carry out the program. We are the ones who have brought parties that had always been excluded into government’. “Fi, Berlusconi sul palco di Fiuggi. Coro dalla platea: ‘Un presidente, c’è solo un presidente’, in *La Repubblica*, 17 September 2017.
7. ‘Italy’s Northern League goes local to stay national’, in *Politico*, 18 October 2017. <https://www.politico.eu/article/italys-northern-league-goes-local-to-stay-national/>.
8. In Lombardy 38.3 percent of those with the right to vote actually voted, with 96 percent responding ‘Yes’ to the question posed. In Veneto 57.2 percent of those entitled to vote did so, with 98.1 percent voting ‘Yes’.
9. ‘Cosa fanno Salvini e Berlusconi?’, in *Il Post*, 18 September 2017. <https://www.ilpost.it/2017/09/18/salvini-berlusconi-leader-centrodestra/>.
10. Simona Casalini: ‘Berlusconi: “Avanti con Gentiloni se non c’è maggioranza. Poi si rivoterà”. Ira di Salvini contro Forza Italia’, in *la Repubblica* 13 December 2017.
11. James Politi and Davide Ghiglione: ‘Meloni takes Italian far-right back to 1930s roots’, in *Financial Times*, 10 February 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/f8c32044-0d92-11e8-8eb7-42f857ea9f09?desktop=true&segmentId=d8d3e364-5197-20eb-17cf-2437841d178a>.
12. On this matter, see for example Marangoni (2009) and De Giorgi (2010).
13. Barbara Fiammeri: ‘Salvini: “Subito flat tax e stop all’Iva Le coperture? Meno risorse alla Ue e federalismo fiscale”’, in *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 7 June 2017. <http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/notizie/2017-06-06/subito-flat-tax-e-stop-all-iva-coperture-meno-risorse-ue-e-federalismo-fiscale-230009.shtml?uuid=AEo5RxZB>.
14. Valerio Valentini: ‘Ma quale svolta, sull’uscita dall’euro Salvini non ha cambiato idea. Parola di Borghi’, in *Il Foglio*, 1 November 2017. <https://www.ilfoglio.it/politica/2017/11/01/news/ma-quale-svolta-sull-uscita-dall-euro-salvini-non-ha-cambiato-idea-parola-di-borghi-160959/>.
15. On the speeches delivered in Koblenz and Pontida, see the references in notes 1 and 9.
16. ‘Berlusconi, Salvini e Meloni sottoscrivono il programma: divisi su leadership uniti contro la Fornero’, in *La Stampa*, 18 January 2018. <http://www.lastampa.it/2018/01/18/italia/politica/berlusconi-salvini-e-meloni-sottoscrivono-il-programma-divisi-su-leadership-uniti-contro-la-fornero-SJUIGI6kJCHZQ27L5OwBRL/pagina.html>.

17. Carmine Gazzanni: 'Profondo nero: da CasaPound a Forza Nuova, viaggio nella galassia della destra italiana', in *Linkiesta*, 2 October 2015. <http://www.linkiesta.it/article/2015/10/02/profondo-nero-da-casapound-a-forza-nuova-viaggio-nella-galassia-della-/27623/>.
18. One of the main parties of the extreme right in Italy in the 1970s.
19. The laws that sanction and punish those guilty of 'gestures, deeds and slogans linked to the nazi-fascist ideology' and 'condoning fascism' respectively.
20. From the movement's website [www.forzanuova.eu](http://www.forzanuova.eu).
21. 'I fascisti di Forza Nuova contro l'Espresso e Repubblica: "Infami non vi daremo tregua"', in *L'Espresso* 6 December 2017. <http://espresso.repubblica.it/attualita/2017/12/06/news/i-fascisti-di-forza-nuova-contro-l-espresso-fumogeni-e-maschere-sotto-la-redazione-1.315634>.
22. Report on 'La violenza di CasaPound a Ostia', in *Internazionale* 16 November 2017. <https://www.internazionale.it/reportage/2017/11/16/ostia-casapound-violenze>.
23. Tobias Jones: 'The fascist movement that has brought Mussolini back to the mainstream', in *The Guardian*, 22 February 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/feb/22/casapound-italy-mussolini-fascism-mainstream>.
24. Gianluca De Rosa: 'Tutto su quei "bravi ragazzi" di CasaPound', *Il Foglio*, 2 November 2017. <https://www.ilfoglio.it/roma-capoccia/2017/11/02/news/tutto-su-quei-bravi-ragazzi-di-casapound-161071/>.
25. David Allegranti: 'Dove portano le corrispondenze amorose fra Lega e destra sovranista', *Il Foglio* 1 December 2017. <https://www.ilfoglio.it/politica/2017/12/01/news/dove-portano-le-corrispondenze-amorose-fra-lega-e-destra-sovraniista-166605/>.
26. 'Ostia, Salvini: "Casapound? È movimento riconosciuto dalla legge. Certi voti io non li prendo"', *Il Fatto Quotidiano* 10 November 2017. <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2017/11/10/ostia-salvini-casapound-e-movimento-riconosciuto-dalla-legge-certi-voti-io-non-li-prendo/3969524/>.

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## Notes on contributors

*Filippo Tronconi* is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Bologna.

*Elisabetta De Giorgi* is a Researcher in Political Science at the Portuguese Institute of International Relations (IPRI) at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa.

## ORCID

Elisabetta De Giorgi  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6553-341X>

Filippo Tronconi  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4529-5968>

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