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UMBERTO BOSSI: THE GREAT NARRATOR OF THE NORTH AND PROMOTER OF PADANIA¹

ABSTRACT

Umberto Bossi, the Lombard labourer and would-be doctor and later legendary founder of the populist right-wing political party Northern League, is one of the greatest exponents of the so-called second Italian Republic. By founding the Lombard League in 1984 – which later, together with other autonomist groups, evolved into the Northern League – he aimed to instil regional pride and identity among the northern Italian population. Using historical memory, Celtic mythology, tribal culture, and folklore, he crafted a compelling narrative that resonated with diverse social groups. This paper examines Bossi's charismatic leadership as the iconic founding father and long-time leader of the oldest party in the Italian Republic. His role as a significant political personality is analysed through his promotion of Padania, a proposed independent nation and state in northern Italy. The article analyses how Bossi used issues of culture, regional identity, criticism of centralism, and demands for autonomy to create a coherent political movement. Empirically, it draws on both discourse analysis and source materials, revealing Bossi's key communication strategies from the founding of the Lombard League in 1984 until the European elections in June 2024.

Keywords: Umberto Bossi, Padania, Northern League, political representation, charismatic leadership, narrative, biography

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INTRODUCTION

In her book *L'Umberto. L'uomo che ha inventato il Nord* (Umberto. The man who invented the North), the latest biography of Umberto Bossi, published in April 2024, Aurora Lussana stated that Bossi was more than just a politician. A Lombard political journalist, Lussana paid tribute to a *strict leader, but also a talented strategist and dreamer*, describing him as *a man always faithful to himself, his ideals, and his battles*.² There is no doubt that the Lombardian is an extremely interesting figure both on the Italian political scene and in the European context. With time working as a labourer and an abortive career as a doctor to his name before becoming the legendary founder of the populist-right political party Northern League for the Independence of Padania (Lega Nord, LN), he has also been a member of the Senate of the Italian Republic, the Chamber of Deputies, and the European Parliament. Known primarily as a tireless activist for an independent Padania, his life and political activities have left a lasting mark on the entire Italian political culture, influencing and redefining both regional and national identity. This is confirmed both by extensive debates on Bossi ongoing for over 40 years, and by his continued political activity.³

By founding the Lombard League (Lega Lombarda, LL) in 1984, which later evolved into the LN together with other autonomist groups, Bossi aimed to instil regional pride and identity among the northern Italian population. Harnessing historical memory, Celtic mythology, tribal culture and folklore, and emphasising the uniqueness of this territory's cultural community, he crafted a compelling narrative that resonated with diverse social groups, altering the then established political discourse. Although he did not have a direct intellectual influence on the development of the concept of Padanian ethno-nationalism – compared, for example, to the historian of political and legal thought and the LN's main ideologist, Gianfranco Miglio – he is certainly regarded as the de facto creator of the Padanian community, a kind of 'father of the nation'.⁴ His vision gradually evolved over the years, including various components. Better than anyone else, however, he laid the groundwork for the development of autonomist-federalist, or even separatist, ideas in contemporary Italy. At the same time, his long political career – based largely on charisma and a colourful image – and his numerous state positions made him one of the most enduring, recognisable, and original political personalities in the history of the Republic of Italy. The question arises,

² A. Lussana, *L'Umberto. L'uomo che ha inventato il Nord*, Trebaseleghe 2024.

³ R. Barraclough, "Umberto Bossi: Charisma, Personality and Leadership," *Modern Italy*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1998), pp. 263-269; M. Belpoliti, "Canotta: il canotta: fenomenologia di Umberto Bossi," in M. Barengi, M. Bonazzi (eds), *Immaginario leghista: l'irruzione delle pulsioni nella politica contemporanea*, Macerata 2012, pp. 44-52; F. Amato, *Umberto B.*, Torino 2019; G. Newth, *Fathers of the Lega: Populist Regionalism and Populist Nationalism in Historical Perspective*, Abingdon 2024.

⁴ For more on Gianfranco Miglio's activities, see: G. Oneto, "Cultura e libertà: attualità del pensiero di Gianfranco Miglio," *Quaderni Padani*, vol. 46 (2003), pp. 55-57; A. Vitale, "La politica e le relazioni internazionali nella concezione scientifica di Gianfranco Miglio," *Rivista di Politica*, vol. 3 (2011), pp. 97-107.

however, whether the popularity of a person is accompanied by the popularity of his ideas. An analysis of Italian political culture suggests that it is not.

This paper aims to analyse Bossi's charismatic leadership as the iconic founder and long-time leader of the oldest party in Italian politics. His role as a significant political figure is examined through his promotion of Padania, a proposed independent nation and state in northern Italy. The study focuses on examining Bossi's ability to mobilise and unite diverse social groups in Northern Italy through effective narratives and rhetoric from 1984 to 2024. Straddling cultural studies and political sciences, it adopts an interdisciplinary approach to analyse how Bossi used issues of regional culture, legacy, and identity, combined with criticism of centralism and demands for autonomy, to create a coherent political movement. Given his ambitions to create a separate state, it is interesting to highlight his contribution to shaping the identity of Padania, especially considering the region's geographical location. The hypothetical Padania lies in a territory strongly linked to Western values and concepts of political nationalism, which, stemming from the French Revolution and the ideas of Marsilius of Padua, emphasise rational premises such as the state and law. Without his own state, however, Bossi sought identity in the values of cultural nationalism, which were typical of Central and Eastern Europe. The study's novel contribution lies in its interdisciplinary analysis of how Bossi's leadership blended Western political nationalism with Central and Eastern European cultural nationalism, positioning Padania within a broader ideological and geopolitical framework. This perspective challenges conventional interpretations of regionalism in Italy by showing how Bossi's movement transcended purely economic or administrative concerns, shaping an alternative national identity through cultural and historical claims. Empirically, the article draws on discourse analysis, including selected speeches, party documents, campaign materials, and media messages, revealing Bossi's key communication strategies from the founding of the LL in 1984 to the present, set against the background of his family life. The findings underscore the importance of narrative in building charismatic leadership and demonstrate Bossi's enduring influence on Italy's political and cultural landscape. This case study also highlights the broader implications of political representation in shaping national identities, emphasising the pivotal role of individual leaders in the creation and promotion of nationalist movements.

'MY FIGHT IS THEIR FIGHT' PROFILE AND FAMILY LIFE OF THE FUTURE FATHER OF PADANIA

Umberto Bossi was born on 19 September 1941, in Soiano, a district of Cassano Magnago, a small Lombard town in the province of Varese, into a family with working-class, Catholic, and anti-communist traditions.⁵ When considering his intellectual

⁵ He was born, the first of three children, to Ambrogio Bossi (a textile worker with previous war experience, including a stint in a French prison in Algeria) and Ida Valentina Mauri (a porter). Ambrogio met his son only after returning from the front, five years after Umberto was born.

formation, it is important to emphasise that his educational path is not very transparent. As Giuseppe Baiocchi, the author of a biography of Bossi published in 2011, points out, although the knowledge of the future pioneer of the 'Padanian idea' was never structured according to academic standards or characterised by regular and methodical studies, it was nonetheless extensive, empirical, and distinguished by a unique syncretism.

Regarding Bossi's religious upbringing, despite being raised in a family with strong Catholic traditions (his uncle was a member of the Jesuit order), he was essentially anticlerical, with a largely negative attitude toward religion. He displayed a degree of hostility toward the Church, which likely influenced his later ambivalent relationship with it. Although his attitude toward religion evolved over the years, it is worth noting that criticism of the Catholic Church remained a consistent element in Bossi's narrative.

As noted by the authors of *Razza padana*, Adalberto Signore and Alessandro Trocino, Bossi was a resourceful young man leading an adventurous life, while simultaneously going to great lengths and exploring various avenues in pursuit of his objectives.⁶ This style of being would define him throughout his subsequent political career – suffice it to mention the string of legal proceedings stemming from his controversial public behaviour.

After obtaining his diploma from the *liceo scientifico*, Bossi enrolled in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Pavia, but he never completed his studies. As he declared himself, before embarking on an active political career, he changed professions several times. He worked as an electrical technician, labourer, technical specialist, computer scientist, and teacher of mathematics and physics.⁷ In information provided on official state institution websites, he has declared his profession as journalist or editor/publisher.⁸ In the 1960s, he had a brief stint as a singer and songwriter under the pseudonym Donato.⁹ He was also the author of poems in the Lombard dialect, expressing his love for the land and tradition. It is noteworthy that from his youth, Bossi had a profound attachment to everything related to his local territory. This love for tradition and 'his land' was supposedly inherited from his father Ambrogio, who believed that *the historical memory of a people can be a spark for the redemption of its land*.¹⁰

It is also worth emphasising that from early on Bossi, with his fondness for everything local, opposed the idea of Italian unification. His ideas mainly focused on the size, materials, and moral power of the northern part of the Apennine Peninsula. Analysing the process of Italy's creation, he began by asserting that *in Italy, there is not one*

⁶ A. Signore, A. Trocino, *Razza padana*, Milano 2008, pp. 16-17, p. 18.

⁷ G. Passalacqua, *Il vento della Padania: storia della Lega Nord 1984-2009*, Milano 2009, p. 9.

⁸ "Bossi Umberto – Lega," *Camera dei deputati*, at https://www.camera.it/leg19/29?tipoAttivita=&tipoVisAtt=&shadow_deputato=32460&lettera=&idLegislatura=19&tipoPersona=, 15 February 2023.

⁹ In 1961, he and his band participated in the national song festival in Castrocaro. He also co-wrote two albums. C. Del Frate, "Ho io il 45 giri in cui canta Bossi. Spunta il boogie woogie del Senatur," *Corriere della Sera*, 2 April 2011, at https://www.corriere.it/politica/11_aprile_02/delfrate-45-giri-di-bossidonato_1ff207fe-5cf9-11e0-ae5b-9965e363da95.shtml, 15 February 2023.

¹⁰ A. Signore, A. Trocino, *Razza padana...*, p. 15.

people, but different peoples united by the rhetoric of unification.¹¹ Moreover, as a proud resident of Lombardy, he argued in his campaigning that *many of the protagonists of the Risorgimento period also came from this region. Therefore, as their heirs, [the Lombards] do not have to apologize to anyone or ask for anything.*¹² In Bossi's view, the Italian state — formed in the 19th century through the unification of the Apennine Peninsula under the Kingdom of Sardinia — fails to function effectively or address the needs of its citizens in the modern era. It therefore needed to be changed and institutionally adapted.

During his medical studies, at the age of 34, Bossi married his fellow Lombardian Gigliola Guidali. Their son Riccardo was born in 1979. Three years later, his wife filed for separation and then divorce, citing her husband's lack of sincerity.¹³ At that time, Bossi's passions were more aligned with dialectal poetry and local politics than with medicine and family. He was involved in the activities of the philological club operating in Varese, promoting the local history and dialect. At a conference at which he was speaking on historical linguistics, he met a teacher of Sicilian origin, Manuela Marrone.¹⁴ In 1994, she became his second wife. Three sons were born from this union: Renzo (1988), Roberto Libertà (1990), and Eridano Sirio (1995). Notably, from the outset of her future husband's autonomist-federalist activities, Marrone played a role not only as a life companion guarding the home hearth, but also as a sort of Westphalian — a guardian of the Padanian nation created by Bossi, something like 'a first lady'. Suffice it to mention that in 1984, she was one of the six signatories of the founding act, aimed at achieving administrative and cultural autonomy for Lombardy, of the Autonomous Lombard League — the precursor of the LN.¹⁵

¹¹ U. Bossi, D. Vimercati, *Vento dal Nord. La mia Lega. La mia vita*, Milano 1992, p. 159.

¹² "Rocchetta avrà esagerato ma Craxi stia al suo posto," *La Repubblica*, 21 April 1990, at <https://le-citazioni.it/frasi/205440-umberto-bossi-il-risorgimento-e-un-fatto-che-ha-visto-protagonis/>, 22 February 2023.

¹³ As she later confessed in an interview for the weekly magazine *Oggi*: *I married him because he made me mountains of promises. But he never kept any of them. That's how he is — incurably inconsistent. He says one thing and does another. I don't regret leaving him, even though he was successful in politics. I couldn't trust him. Neither I nor any of our friends at the time.* Guidali added that Bossi would leave every morning with a doctor's bag, saying, *Bye honey, I am going to the hospital.* In reality, not only did he not work as a doctor, but he also did not even finish his studies. "Umberto? Bugiardo e sfaticato," *La Repubblica*, 19 October 1994, at <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1994/10/19/umberto-bugiardo-sfaticato.html>, 15 February 2023; G.A. Stella, "Bossi, in Europa il fratello e il figlio del Senatùr," *Corriere della Sera*, 11 November 2004, at https://www.corriere.it/Primo_Piano/Politica/2004/11_Novembre/11/bossi_stella.shtml, 15 February 2023.

¹⁴ Marrone was born in Milan to a Sicilian father and a Milanese mother.

¹⁵ According to media reports, the idea of founding the party supposedly originated in Marrone's studio apartment before her relationship with Bossi had been formalised. *Instead of romantic moments, for the first ten years she had to hang up posters. Instead of getting married, Bossi took her to a notary to sign the League's statute.* Years later, Bossi stated, *my wife put money into the creation of the League and even gave us the first headquarters, her house, because we had nothing else.* S. Grilli, "Discese in campo: la 'Senatura,'" *Panorama*, 23 July 2004, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20100405195206/http://archivio.panorama.it/home/articolo/idA020001025924>, 15 February 2023.

Bossi made use of Manuela Marrone in a conceptual sense, portraying her as an icon of the LN and, in a broader sense, of the entire Padanian project. Over the years, she served as an alibi for the party leader's often controversial behaviour. For instance, when accused of racism in a broad sense, he would point out that his wife was Sicilian; or when allegations of bribery by Rome surfaced, he would refer to his wife's modest salary as a teacher and their humble family life in Padania.¹⁶ Marrone, on the other hand, always appreciated Bossi's simplicity. As she admitted, *I liked his love for the simple aspects of life: home, family, a beautiful forest, a beautiful meadow.*¹⁷ There is no doubt that the LN formed over the years by Bossi was a kind of family party. His family was meant to assist him in realising his 'greatest dream in life' – a free and independent Padania. For him, politics and private life were intertwined and mutually influential. As he stated, *I am the type of barbarian who takes his family to battle. My woman and my children must smell the dust and the clang of the sword. My fight is their fight.*¹⁸

It is therefore unsurprising that between 2004 and 2006, amid the illness of the charismatic 'father of the nation', it was Marrone, supported by her family, who endeavoured to uphold the bond within Bossi's so-called magic circle – a group of 'loyalists' dedicated to continuing his thoughts and concepts. An important role in this endeavour was also played by her eldest son (the second of Bossi's four sons), Renzo, colloquially known as *il trota* (the trout).¹⁹ Earmarked as his father's successor, he accompanied him on his return to active politics, participating in party rallies and events

'LOMBARDY IS A NATION, ITALY JUST A STATE.' AN OUTLINE OF THE BEGINNINGS OF UMBERTO BOSSI'S POLITICAL ACTIVITY (1974–1989)

Today widely known by his nickname, *il Senatùr*,²⁰ the tireless autonomist and future leader of the LN, Umberto Bossi, began his political career sympathising with communist groups. His youthful leftist views are confirmed by his collaboration in the 1970s with organisations such as the Party of Proletarian Unity for Communism and the Italian Recreational and Cultural Association (ARCI), the newspaper *il manifesto*, and

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ A. Checchi, "La chiamavo terrona, ma la sposo lo stesso," *Oggi*, 11 October 1993, quoted in A. Signore, A. Trocino, *Razza padana...*, p. 31.

¹⁸ A. Signore, A. Trocino, *Razza padana...*, p. 33.

¹⁹ Renzo Bossi is commonly called *il trota* (the trout) since his father, in 2008, jokingly referred to him not as a dolphin but as a trout when asked if he was a potential successor to the party, using the word 'dolphin', or 'dauphin' (the word *delfino* is a homonym in Italian, with both meanings), a reference to the title of the heir to the French throne. "Renzo 'delfino'? Per ora è una trota," *Corriere della Sera*, 8 September 2012, at https://www.corriere.it/politica/08_settembre_12/bossi_renzo_delfino_5a6b4806-80cd-11dd-b38b-00144f02aabc.shtml, 21 February 2022.

²⁰ An equivalent of the word 'senator' derived from the Lombard dialect, specifically from the so-called *varesotto*. Note that in Italian culture, nicknames play a very important role. Their use indicates a need for identification and a strong tendency to stand out in social life.

various ecological movements. In 1975, according to the official register of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), Bossi, giving his occupation as doctor, became a member of the party in the local section of Verghera di Samarate (Varese province).²¹ Despite being listed in the party register, he denied his communist past. He only admitted that for several months in 1974–1975 he had been involved in the PCI solidarity initiative, helping to organise a fundraiser for the dissidents against Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet.²² His affiliation was supposedly based solely on his commitment to the party, and his closeness to the student movements was incidental, not based on conviction. The year 1979, when Bossi's first son was born, marked a turning point not only in his private life but also in the history of the contemporary 'Padanian idea'. Sources indicate that the decisive event initiating his later broad-based autonomist-federalist activity was a chance meeting at the University of Pavia with Bruno Salvadori, leader of the Union Valdôtaine (UV), an Italian regional political party operating in the autonomous region of the Aosta Valley.²³

Bossi responded very positively to this movement and immediately began promoting its ideas, initially in his native Varese area, and gradually creating a network of similar movements throughout northern Italy. This chance meeting sparked a friendship and, crucially, launched Bossi's dizzying political career. By cooperating with Salvadori, he demonstrated his talent as an organiser and strategist, but also as a utopian idealist, with a firm commitment to his values. While the UV leader proposed developing federalism through technical and legal projects, Bossi believed that the cultural space and political goals had much more complex contours. He argued that they concerned the broad framework of a society's memory that, after 1968, had lost not only its roots but also its values.²⁴ In his ambitious vision, he sought their rebirth. It seems that this simplicity and belief in his ideals were key elements of the future senator's success at that time.²⁵

²¹ The document reveals that he was registered as a doctor, even though he never obtained the right to practice the profession. "Umberto Bossi iscritto al Pci," *L'Espresso*, 2 December 2010, at <https://espresso.repubblica.it/foto/2010/12/02/galleria/umberto-bossi-iscritto-al-pci-1.73858/>, 15 February 2023; see: L. Facco, *Umberto Magno. La vera storia dell'imperatore della Padania*, Reggio Emilia 2010.

²² "Bossi e il PCI 'Attivista, senza tessera,'" *La Stampa*, 29 September 1993, p. 4, at https://web.archive.org/web/20090815033202/http://archivio.lastampa.it/LaStampaArchivio/main/History/tmpl_viewObj.jsp?objid=1151312, 16 February 2023.

²³ Bruno Salvadori, representing the UV, delivered a manifesto on federalist ideas in the atrium of the University of Pavia ("Nelle librerie l'unica biografia di Umberto Bossi," *Affari italiani*, 16 September 2011, at https://archive.ph/20120708081320/http://affaritaliani.libero.it/politica/nelle_librerie_lunica_biografia_di_umberto_bossi160911.html#selection-655.0-655.49, 16 February 2023; see also *Cronistoria della Lega Nord dalle origini ad oggi, Prima Parte 1979-1987*, p. 35, at https://www.cortecostituzionale.it/documenti/download/pdf/The_Constitution_of_the_Italian_Republic.pdf, 15 February 2023.).

²⁴ "Nelle librerie..."

²⁵ In 1979, a meeting also took place between Bossi and an aspiring young lawyer, his fellow Lombardian Roberto Maroni. This meeting resulted in their later long-standing political relationship. It was initiated through the editing of the magazine *Nord Ovest*, under the aegis of the Nord Ovest publishing house founded together with Salvadori, as well as through the distribution of posters and the

Bossi's promising collaboration with the UV leader was brutally cut short by Salvadori's unexpected death in a car accident on June 9, 1980. This tragedy also halted the development of Bossi's career. However, the short but intense alliance solidified his position within the emerging regional autonomist groups in northern Italy. Despite losing his partner, Bossi did not abandon his ideals. He continued his involvement in autonomist movements, participating in meetings of the Piedmont autonomist movement *Unione Ossolana per l'Autonomia* (UOPA) in the Ossola Valley. Inspired by this movement, Bossi created his first political entity in 1980 – the North-Western Lombard Union for Autonomy (UNOLPA).²⁶

In the face of mounting financial problems – both those related to Salvadori's debts and his own personal ones – the future LN leader displayed determination and ambition, stubbornly refusing to give in to adversity. A self-confident autonomist, he began to propagate his ideas in the periodical *Lombardia Autonomista*, founded in 1982. Its first issue appeared in March of the same year as a supplement to the newspaper *Rinascita Piemontese*, edited by the Piedmontese autonomy activist, historian, and journalist Roberto Gremmo.

For the next four years, the magazine's editor-in-chief and publisher promoted his ideas through his articles both in the publication and in surrounding circles. Known for the clarity of its articles, the magazine became the main propaganda tool of the movement during that period and a column dedicated to reader mail connected activists and supporters. Bossi began his journalistic debut with the words:

*No matter how old you are, what job you do, or what political views you hold: what matters is that you are – that we are – Lombards. This is a truly important fact. It is time to remind ourselves of this, making it politically concrete. And as Lombards, we all have a fundamental common interest, in the face of which our divisions motivated by party ideologies must take a back seat: the Italian parties that exploit us and divert our commitment from defending our interests, in order to serve the interests of others (and above all their own!). Our fundamental common interest is the liberation of Lombardy from the voracious and suffocating hegemony of the centralist government of Rome, through Lombard autonomy and, in a broader context, Padanian-Alpine autonomy. It is a matter of Lombard survival – ethnic, cultural, economic – in which the sense of moral, civic, political responsibility of all Lombards is invested, without any distinction.*²⁷

It is important to emphasise, however, that while Bossi primarily presented his ideas and proposals based on the case of Lombardy, his manifesto also included broader references. As he stated:

Lombardy no longer belongs to Lombards, Padania no longer belongs to Padanians. They are merely geographical expressions devoid of any political value, mere territories

placement of autonomist slogans on walls (G. Passalacqua, *Il vento della Padania...*, p. 10). As Bossi stated, *the walls are the book of the people*. M. Pucciarelli, "La Lega Lombarda compie 35 anni: da un notaio di Varese iniziò l'avventura di Umberto Bossi," *La Repubblica*, 9 April 2019, at https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2019/04/11/news/compleanno_lega_lombarda_35_anni_bossi-223795365/, 17 February 2023.

²⁶ G. Polli, "La grande storia della Lega: Unolpa, culla del Carroccio," *La Padania*, 10 March 2012, p. 10.

²⁷ *Cronistoria della Lega Nord dalle origini ad oggi, Prima Parte...*, p. 40.

*without rights in the face of interference from others. Their people are a mass stripped of political identity, anonymously incorporated into a failing nation-state that drags them into a hopeless crisis.*²⁸

Moreover, he was convinced that *Rome uses [the Padanian] territories as if they were its own*, while asserting that *the Padanian-Alpine populations would have the possibility and capability to evade crises and truly rise to a European standard*.²⁹ Bossi criticised the central government in Rome, asserting that *with the complicity of all Italian parties, it only talks about autonomy and Europe, but in reality, it does not truly desire either genuine autonomy or a European Federal State*.³⁰ As a result, he believed that the European Parliament was merely a facade deliberately crafted without the powers and structures of regional governments, which he considered not as autonomous administrations, but merely as administrative duplicates of the central government.³¹

In 1983, Bossi made an unsuccessful attempt to gain political experience by running for a seat in the Parliament of the Italian Republic on the *Lista per Trieste*, an autonomist movement's list. The turning point in Bossi's political life appears to have occurred in 1984, with the official registration of the Autonomous Lombard League (LAL), which had been operating unofficially since March 10, 1982 (as a continuation of UNOLPA). By signing the founding act of the group in Varese on April 12, 1984, along with others, Bossi automatically became its national secretary for nearly the next decade, as well as the primary driving force behind its thoughts and actions.³² Notably, it was during this period that the idea of a widely developed symbolic apparatus for the party was conceived in the imagination of the future *Senatur*, inspired by events from over eight centuries previously – the historical oath in Pontida and the activities of the medieval Lombard League, an association of northern Italian cities allied against the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick I Barbarossa.³³

In the early stages of the concept's development, Bossi firmly supported autonomist ideas rooted in ethno-cultural identity, focusing primarily on advocating for Lombardy's autonomy, similar to that of Italy's special statute regions.³⁴ Over time, however,

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² The co-founders were Manuela Marrone (his future wife), Pierangelo Brivio, Giuseppe Leoni, Marino Moroni, and Emilio Benito Rodolfo Sogliaghi.

³³ D. Albertazzi, "'Back to Our Roots' or Self-Confessed Manipulation? The Uses of the Past in the Lega Nord's Positing of Padania," *National Identities*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2006), pp. 21-39; M.M. Fijał, "The Role of Cities in the Process of Shaping the Northern Italian Cultural Identity. The Case of Pontida," in E. Höhn, E. Reichwalderová (eds), *Rozvoj urbánnej kultúry. Development of Urban Culture*, Banská Bystrica 2021, pp. 163-189.

³⁴ See the "Constitution of the Italian Republic 1947," Art. 116, at https://www.cortecostituzionale.it/documenti/download/pdf/The_Constitution_of_the_Italian_Republic.pdf, 15 February 2023; Cf. M. Huyseune, *Modernità e secessione. Le scienze sociali e il discorso politico della Lega Nord*, Roma 2004, p. 227.

he realised that claims solely based on ethnicity would not produce concrete results. Objectively speaking, Lombardy lacked a significant ethnic minority to justify such claims. Bossi therefore made the definitive decision to abandon the idea of ethnic regionalism in favour of focusing on articulating the socio-economic disparities between Italy's North and South. Absorbed in local issues and thus displaying complete indifference to national concerns, he was convinced that a strong emphasis on local autonomies – in opposition to the central state – would lead to an improvement in the living conditions of northern Italian society.³⁵

Initially, Bossi did not achieve significant political success. In the 1984 elections to the European Parliament, representing the newly formed party, he failed to win a seat. His first major electoral triumph came only three years later, during the Italian parliamentary elections. Running as a candidate from the party's list, renamed LL in 1986, he was elected to both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Ultimately, he chose the latter, permanently adopting the nickname *Senatur*. The year 1987 therefore marked Bossi's direct entry into so-called 'big politics', although, as he later reflected, understanding *the mechanisms of the Roman political system* proved to be a *cup of bitter torment* for him.³⁶

The electoral efforts of the then LL leader led to the party's increasing success and the continued consolidation of the project to unify the various autonomist movements in northern Italy, with Bossi playing a pivotal role. By reshaping the group's profile to form an alliance among regional leagues, he ambitiously aimed to transition Italy from a unitary state to a federation. The initial step on this federal path was the establishment of an electoral coalition during the European Parliamentary elections in February 1989. Building on this momentum, and through the collaboration of six federative entities unified under Bossi's leadership, further successes culminated nine months later in the signing of the founding act and the statute of a new confederal political alliance called the LN in Bergamo.³⁷

PADANIA IS AN INDEPENDENT AND SOVEREIGN FEDERAL REPUBLIC. BOSSI AS THE LEGENDARY FOUNDER AND LEADER OF THE NORTHERN LEAGUE AND THE CREATOR OF PADANIA (1989–2012)

There is no doubt that Bossi's political ideas evolved under the influence of the events of the late 1980s in Europe. The year 1989 held fundamental significance for international relations and political transformations not only in Eastern Europe but also for the formulation of new political agendas in Western Europe, including Italy. Bossi

³⁵ G. Passarelli, D. Tuorto, *Lega & Padania. Storie e luoghi delle camicie verdi*, Bologna 2012, pp. 28-30.

³⁶ U. Bossi, D. Vimercati, *Vento dal Nord...*, quoted in A. Signore, A. Trocino, *Razza padana...*, p. 43.

³⁷ As a reminder, these were the Lombard League, Venetian League, Autonomous Piedmont, Ligurian Union, Emilian-Romagnol League, and Tuscan Alliance.

employed his innovative concept of founding a party that defended political-economic interests and regional identity, centred on a strategy of emphasising the ethnic profile of the northern Italian population, to pursue autonomous power. In December 1989, his new political venture was launched with the slogan: *aiming for the political leadership of Italy, while temporarily remaining in opposition*.³⁸ To attain credibility and achieve satisfactory results, he viewed it as imperative to establish a strong, unified leadership free from internal divisions.

The newly established federalist entity at the end of 1989 was consecrated by its founder a few months after its inception through a ceremony where individuals from the North took an oath to *remain loyal to the cause of autonomy and freedom of nations*.³⁹ This occurred in May 1990 in Pontida. It is worth noting that from that moment on, the Lombard town became a sort of epicentre for every project championed by Bossi, serving as a venue for meetings and interactions with the Padanian community. The declaration made in Pontida was subsequently put into action during the electoral campaign, when Bossi introduced the revolutionary concept of socio-economic federalism.⁴⁰

Thanks to his close connections with the leading proponent of federalism in Italy at the time, Gianfranco Miglio, Bossi emerged as a staunch advocate for transforming the Italian state into a federation. In his paradoxical vision, federalism was to serve as a unifying force for the country. He emphasised strongly that centralised states breed nationalism and aggression, overlooking cultural and regional diversity.⁴¹ Bossi aimed to foster culture and safeguard the northern Italian identity against assimilation by the central state. While he stressed that his actions were not aimed at undermining the state or the constitution, but rather at rectifying the errors of the unification period, he recognised that federalism alone would not resolve all society's issues.⁴² In his vision, the Italian territory was to be divided into three macro-regions (North, Centre, and South), with consideration given to cultural, linguistic, and economic differences.⁴³ He was convinced that this proposal was the only way for the system known as 'Italy' to survive. This concept not only had a significant impact on Italian political and social discourse but also garnered Bossi a gradual increase in support for his ideas.

A year later, following endorsement from his supporters at another gathering in Pontida, attended by over 25,000 representatives of the 'six nations', Bossi resolved to officially proclaim the so-called Northern Republic (*Repubblica del Nord*). As a critic of the prevailing Roman centralism, he aimed to reconfigure the Italian state. He declared:

³⁸ "Cronistoria della Lega Nord dalle origini ad oggi, Seconda Parte 1988-1995," p. 7, at https://www.leganord.org/phocadownload/ilmovimento/storia_ln/02_lega_nord_storia88_95.pdf, 15 February 2023.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 9.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ U. Bossi, D. Vimercati, *Vento dal Nord...*, pp. 165-167.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 164-165.

⁴³ *Cronistoria della Lega Nord dalle origini ad oggi, Seconda Parte...*, p. 9.

*We are in Pontida, a place consecrated by the will and oath of our forebears, to underscore that today marks the commencement of a new political and constitutional era. [...] Make it possible to say that the Republic of the North, founded today on June 16, 1991, is established in the consciousness of the League's members, for it will subsequently become a demand championed with determination by our peoples, compelling the centralist opposition to yield to federalism.*⁴⁴

Bossi revisited this concept following the 1992 parliamentary elections, at which he achieved further success by being elected to the Chamber of Deputies with 240,523 votes, one of the highest results in the country.⁴⁵

In 1992, Italy entered a period of profound systemic changes, marking a symbolic transition to the so-called Second Republic (1992–1994). One of the pivotal factors driving this process, alongside the downfall of the three most influential ideological parties at the time (DC, PSI, PCI), was the corruption scandal of Tangentopoli. The volatile state of affairs in the country precipitated heightened calls for reform in society. This sequence of events provided an excellent platform for Bossi to publicise his achievements.⁴⁶ The LN leader staunchly opposed corrupt practices and was a vocal supporter of the Milan group, referring to the judges of the Milan prosecutor's office tasked with addressing corruption. However, it is noteworthy that despite the propaganda success Bossi enjoyed in this period, he also became embroiled in criminal proceedings related to corruption. He was personally implicated in a case involving an illegal loan of 200 million lire from the chemical company Montedison.⁴⁷ Initially endorsing the government's anti-corruption endeavours, Bossi faced criticism and a decline in credibility due to his controversial actions. During a trial in 1994, he confessed to illegally financing political parties.⁴⁸

Despite the crisis in Italy and the activities of social movements, Bossi remained unwavering in his stance on existing political parties and the state system. He persistently pursued his advocacy for federalism, seeking to expand this idea beyond the Padania region. This was evident in his establishment in May 1993 of a branch of the LN in the central-southern part of the country, named the Italian Federal League (*Lega Italia Federale*). This initiative laid the groundwork for Bossi's subsequent decision to rename the party the Northern Federal League of Italy, which occurred in February 1995.

Bossi reiterated his continuing support for federalist ideals following the outcome of the early parliamentary elections in March 1994, when the League under

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

⁴⁵ The parliamentary mandate obtained was held continuously until 2004. Subsequently, it was held from 2008 to 2018, and again from 2022 onwards.

⁴⁶ M. Clark, *Włochy współczesne 1871-2006*, transl. by T. Wituch, Warszawa 2009, pp. 643-644.

⁴⁷ G. Buccini, "La tangente alla Lega in via Veneto," *Corriere della Sera*, 8 December 1993, p. 2, at http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/1993/dicembre/08/tangente_alla_Lega_via_Veneto_co_0_93120810206.shtml, 15 February 2023.

⁴⁸ G. Da Rold, "Il senatur: quel pm non mi mollava mai," *Corriere della Sera*, 6 January 1994, p. 3, at http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/1994/gennaio/06/senatur_quel_non_mollava_mai_co_0_9401062262.shtml, 15 February 2023.

his leadership joined the right-wing government coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi. It is worth recalling, however, that this government only lasted for eight months due to Bossi withdrawing from the alliance. His departure was partly prompted by the controversial federal reform proposal that he unveiled in November of the same year during the LN's Third Congress in Genoa. With the slogan *Federalismo Subito!* (Federalism Now!), he advocated for the division of Italy into nine macroregions, corresponding territorially to the units of the Apennine Peninsula before unification.⁴⁹

In his speech to the Chamber of Deputies on December 21, 1994, Bossi articulated the reasons for his lack of trust in the government, emphasising that *when the League agreed to join the coalition to support the government, the agreements signed by Berlusconi at the time included the fulfilment of specific objectives – considered priorities by the League: the cessation of centralism and the welfare state, and institutional reform in a federal direction [...]*.⁵⁰ Due to the failure to enact these reforms, the League's secretary accused the then prime minister of insincerity, dishonesty, and hypocrisy, declaring: *[...] I have a duty! To finally put an end to the First Republic today. The League, esteemed president, expresses its lack of confidence in your government* (26). Berlusconi resigned, asserting that Bossi was not a reliable ally.⁵¹

The last, and simultaneously the briefest, legislative term in the history of the First Republic was a pivotal component of the aforementioned systemic breakthrough (1992–1994), concurrently ushering in a fresh perspective on the role of politicians in society. In this context, it is pertinent to highlight the clash between two formidable personalities among the emerging political leaders. Half a year before the downfall of Berlusconi's initial government, on 24 August 1994 – during a holiday at an exclusive resort in Porto Cervo on the Emerald Coast in Sardinia – Bossi appeared on a television broadcast. He was perhaps influenced by the new approach to political presentation pioneered by the Forza Italia (FI) founder, focused on directness and media visibility. By delivering political statements, including criticisms of his then coalition partner, he showcased his uncompromising nature and the determination of his vision. An additional aspect of Bossi's appeal was his casual, vacation-style appearance – wearing a simple, sleeveless white undershirt. The uniqueness of his attire bolstered his popularity and conveyed a compelling message about the leader's authenticity, defying the norms not only of the VIP-filled environment but also of politics in general.

⁴⁹ These were supposed to be: 1. Piedmont, Aosta Valley, Liguria; 2. Lombardy; 3. Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia; 4. Emilia and Tuscany; 5. Romagna, Umbria, Marche, Lazio; 6. Abruzzo, Molise, Apulia; 7. Campania and Calabria; 8. Sicily; 9. Sardinia.

⁵⁰ "Cronistoria bella Lega Nord dalle origini ad oggi, Seconda Parte...", p. 24.

⁵¹ Bossi's decision, however, was construed as a response to the waning support for Berlusconi's FI in the northern regions of the country. According to the journalist Vittorio Feltri, Bossi was persuaded by then President of the Republic, Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, to withdraw from the parliamentary majority supporting the left, thus leaving Berlusconi in the minority (V. Feltri, "Anche il Nord ostaggio della Lega," *il Giornale*, 19 August 2011). It is worth mentioning that this period also marked the beginning of Bossi's career at the European level. In July 1994, he became a Member of the European Parliament, joining the Group of the European Liberal, Democrat, and Reform Party.

Then, in January 1995, following the establishment of the first technical cabinet in Italy's post-war history, led by Lamberto Dini, Bossi delivered a speech in Montecitorio in which he expressed a motion of confidence. He asserted that this decision was rooted in the hope that the potential neutrality of the new government would enable political factions to surmount the constraints of prior alliances and facilitate parliamentary reforms.⁵² Simultaneously, this speech marked the inception of the public narrative on independence and the promotion of the idea of secession, which encapsulated Bossi's ambitions.

The Lombard activist returned to the secessionist idea in its entirety in 1996. Strengthened by a strong electoral consensus and free from the government and opposition agendas, he announced his intention to advance the Padanian independence project.⁵³ It is worth remembering that, as early as June 1995, he had convened the inaugural session of the so-called Parliament of the North in Mantua, which became the Parliament of Padania a year later. During one of his addresses, he introduced the groundbreaking idea of establishing – drawing an analogy to the National Liberation Committee (CLN) operating during World War II – the so-called Committee for the Liberation of Padania (*Comitato di liberazione della Padania*, CLP).⁵⁴ The leader of the Padanians, legitimised this time by the will of his people, asserted that the sole means to safeguard Padania was not federalism but secession.

It is worth noting that Bossi, as a critic of the unification tradition, not only condemned the outcomes and key figures of this process but also displayed disdain for Italian national symbols (Lettieri, 2011). This was manifested most notably in his public insult to the Italian tricolour flag on two occasions.⁵⁵ In 1995, in a radical opposition to all things Italian, Bossi selected the chorus 'Va, pensiero' from Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Nabucco* as Padania's official anthem. In 2008, during a speech at a regional party congress, he quoted from the official anthem of Italy ("The Song of Italians"), saying, *Let her [Italy] bow down because as a slave of Rome God did create her*, while making a vulgar gesture with his middle finger, expressing his definitive disapproval of Padania's slavery.⁵⁶

⁵² "Cronistoria bella Lega Nord dalle origini ad oggi, Seconda Parte...", p. 28.

⁵³ In the parliamentary elections of 1996, LN, running without allies, received 10.8% of the national vote (29% in Veneto, 26% in Lombardy, 18% in Piedmont).

⁵⁴ "Cronistoria bella Lega Nord dalle origini ad oggi, Terza Parte 1996-1998," *Segreteria Organizzativa Federale*, p. 4, at https://www.leganord.org/phocadownload/ilmovimento/storia_ln/03_lega_nord_storia96_98.pdf, 15 February 2023.

⁵⁵ Bossi was sentenced in absentia to one year and four months in prison for two counts of defaming the Italian flag, on July 26 and September 14, 1997. On the first occasion, he used the expression, *It pisses me off when I see the tricolor flag. I use the Tricolore to wipe my butt*. On the second occasion, addressing a woman showing the tricolor flag, he said, *Madam, put that tricolor flag in the toilet*. Quoted in B. Decker, "COMO: Bossi disse 'Mi pulisco il c... con il Tricolore,' la Camera dice no ad autorizzazione a procedure," *Ticino Online*, 23 January 2002, at <https://www.tio.ch/dal-mondo/76498/como-bossi-disse-mi-pulisco-il-c-con-il-tricolore-la-camera-dice-no-ad-autorizzazione-a-procedere>, 22 February 2023.

⁵⁶ "Bossi insulta l'inno di Mameli, bravata o tattica politica?," *L'Espresso*, 28 July 2008, at <https://espresso.repubblica.it/palazzo/2008/07/21/news/bossi-insulta-l-inno-di-mameli-br-bravata-o-tattica-politica-1.9335/>, 21 March 2022.

In a relentless and aggressive stance against the founding myth of the Italian nation-state, Bossi also rejected commemorations of its unification. In an interview with the daily *La Repubblica* in 2010, a year prior to the 150th anniversary of unification, he described the celebrations as ‘pointless’ and ‘imposed from above.’⁵⁷ In Bossi’s opinion, such celebrations served to manipulate the population by the central authorities, presenting an ‘oversimplified’ version of history, and in a broader spectrum of nostalgic ‘moralising patriotism.’⁵⁸ To his supporters, however, he showed ‘the other side of the coin’, replacing the official version of history with those favourable to his vision.

On the other hand, Bossi considered the anniversary of Italy’s unification as an opportune moment to revisit the ‘true course of events’, highlighting the federalist roots of the Risorgimento. He sought a swift conclusion to his advocated federalist project, aiming to liberate Padania from Roman dominance. He saw the completion of this endeavour as the realisation of Cavour’s unfulfilled promise to respect regional differences, a pledge ignored by King Victor Emmanuel II.⁵⁹ Notably, Bossi esteemed Count Camillo Benso di Cavour as the sole positive figure among the key players in unification, sharply contrasting with his disdainful characterisation of Giuseppe Garibaldi, whom he branded an ‘imbecile.’⁶⁰ Emphasising Cavour’s federalist leanings, Bossi asserted that his declaration played a crucial role in unifying the country.⁶¹ He believed that his federalist vision represented the true fulfilment of the Risorgimento. As proclaimed, *the time has finally come to return to this promise and to complete the true national history of Italy with federalism.*⁶² He cautioned, *This wait has been too long, but better late than never. Let us not miss the opportunity to repair the country.*⁶³

⁵⁷ A. D’Argenio, “Bossi: Unità d’Italia? Una ricorrenza inutile ci vado se me lo chiede Napolitano,” *La Repubblica*, 4 May 2010, at https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2010/05/04/news/bossi_celebrazioni-3798953/, 21 March 2022.

⁵⁸ A. Scipioni, “Lettera a ‘la Padania,’” *La Padania*, 11 January 2011, p. 10.

⁵⁹ A. D’Argenio, “Bossi: Unità d’Italia?...”

⁶⁰ As Bossi stated, *Of the gang around the king, the only one who saved himself was Cavour*, who initially considered unity to be nonsense [...] and who was compelled to change his mind when Garibaldi offered him the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies on a platter. P. Parenti, “La cena degli ossi,” *la Padania*, 6 January 2011, p. 2; A. Petacco, “Cavour considerava l’unità d’Italia una corbelleria,” *ivi*, 6 January 2011, pp. 14–15.

⁶¹ Bossi’s speculations coincided with the publication of Adriano Viarengo’s biography of Camillo Benso di Cavour. The Italian historian re-examined the political career of the main hero of the Risorgimento, shedding light on previously little-known facts. Among other things, Viarengo presented Cavour’s pre-death proposal (he died only two months after the proclamation of the unification of Italy), which aimed to establish a law in Italy as a minimal state, with macro-regions and administrative autonomy. However, this proposal was rejected by the Piedmont bureaucracy and the leftist circles associated with Giuseppe Mazzini. See: A. Viarengo, *Cavour*, Roma 2010; Cf. E. Di Rienzo, “Il federalismo fiscale? L’ha inventato Cavour,” *il Giornale*, 27 April 2010, at <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/federalismo-fiscale-lha-inventato-cavour.html>, 21 March 2023; E. Di Rienzo, “Quando Cavour sognava il federalismo,” *Nuova Rivista Storica*, 12 April 2010, at <https://www.nuovarivistastorica.it/quando-cavour-sognava-il-federalismo>, 15 February 2023.

⁶² A. D’Argenio, “Bossi: Unità d’Italia?...”

⁶³ *Ibid.*

There is no doubt that Bossi played a leading role in implementing the project of creating a northern Italian state. By positioning himself as the architect of a new nation, he convincingly emphasised the unique identity of Padania. He proclaimed:

*Since time immemorial, we have inhabited, cultivated, protected, and cherished these lands passed down to us by our ancestors, nestled amidst the waters of our majestic rivers. Here, we have forged a unique way of life, nurturing both art and labour. We are part of Padania's historical area, a region deeply integrated socio-economically, yet honouring and embracing the diversity of its people. These lands are bound together by ties as enduring as the changing seasons, the shaping elements, and the diverse inhabitants. Thus, we constitute a natural, cultural, and socio-economic community, sharing a common legacy of values, culture, and history, as well as social, moral, and economic unity. Padania stands as our pride, our invaluable resource, and our sole avenue for freely expressing our individuality and collective spirit.*⁶⁴

The large-scale undertaking was launched at around 6:40 p.m. on 15 September 1996, on the Riva degli Schiavoni in Venice, when instead of the tricolour flag, the green and white flag of Padania (Sun of the Alps) was raised on the mast. Bossi, in his capacity as the nation's leader, delivered a speech lasting nearly 10 minutes, proclaiming that *Padania is an independent and sovereign federal Republic*.⁶⁵ He elucidated:

*We are deeply convinced that Padania's continued presence within the borders of the Italian state would extinguish any prospect of rejuvenation and obliterate the ideals of its constituent peoples. We are aware that a free and independent Padania will emerge as a political and institutional beacon for the establishment of a Europe of Regions and Peoples. We are confident that a liberated and independent Padania will play a pivotal role in fostering cooperation and peace among the world's nations. Assembled here today, we embody the final hope for the cessation of the Roman colonial regime that oppresses Padania.*⁶⁶

The concepts articulated during this period later formed the central themes of two of Bossi's publications: *Il mio progetto*, ('My project') released in 1996, and *La rivoluzione del sorriso: Le tappe dell'indipendenza della Padania* ('The smile revolution: "The stages of Padania's independence"', published a year later.⁶⁷ In these works, the LN leader outlined his visions for a new, independent state and nation, drawing from a compilation of his speeches.

It is worth noting that Bossi's ideas have evolved and adapted over time. While he has been characterised by a certain consistency of action, steadfast belief in the objectives he has proclaimed, and determination, his views have gradually shifted. After the turn of the century, particularly after resuming collaboration with Silvio Berlusconi, Bossi veered towards more moderate initiatives, moving away from extreme visions.

⁶⁴ "Cronistoria bella Lega Nord dalle origini ad oggi, Terza Parte," pp. 12-13.

⁶⁵ U. Bossi, "Declaration of Independence and Sovereignty of Padania," ["Dichiarazione d'Indipendenza della Padania"], *Youtube*, 15 September 1996, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHnSa2buvmw>, 12 February 2023.

⁶⁶ "Cronistoria bella Lega Nord dalle origini ad oggi, Terza Parte," p. 13.

⁶⁷ U. Bossi, *Il mio progetto. Discorsi su federalism e Padania*, Milano 1996; U. Bossi, *La rivoluzione del sorriso. Le tappe dell'indipendenza della Padania. 15 settembre 1996-14 settembre 1997*, Milano 1997.

In 2001, following victory in the parliamentary elections for the centre-right coalition known as the House of Freedom, he was re-elected as a member of parliament and assumed the position of Minister for Institutional Reforms and Devolution (2001–2004). Crucially, while serving as one of the government's most significant representatives, Bossi maintained his outspoken stance and continued to champion slogans such as 'Free Padania!', 'Thieving Rome', and 'Break Italy or die', thus becoming one of the most controversial figures in Italian politics. Despite never seeing his ideas materialise, his efforts aimed to strike a balance between centralism and regional autonomy. Bossi officially abandoned the radical separatist agenda, pivoting towards the notion of fiscal federalism. A simplified version of the 'Padanian idea' was reflected in endeavours to enact constitutional reforms, notably the federal reform known as devolution.

Bossi's ambitious plans were significantly hampered by unexpected illness. In March 2004, he suffered a stroke. Yet despite his health challenges, prolonged hospitalisation, and recovery, he successfully campaigned for a seat in the European Parliament in June of the same year. Although he gradually returned to public life, he fully resumed political activities only a few months later.⁶⁸ Motivated by the Senate's final vote on the decentralisation bill in November 2005, he made an appearance at Palazzo Madama to participate in the reform vote.⁶⁹ Subsequently, in spring 2006, in the run-up to the parliamentary elections, he actively engaged in rallies and public meetings to support his party's candidates.

Given these points, it is notable that despite Bossi's shift away from secessionist notions and the subsequent decline in his health, his ideas continued to draw attention. The devolution proposal was put forward for a constitutional referendum in June 2006. Following the rejection of decentralisation plans and the aspiration for Italy to become a quasi-federal republic, Bossi reverted to advocating for fiscal federalism. Upon his re-election to the Chamber of Deputies in 2008 and his appointment as Minister for Institutional Reform in Berlusconi's fourth government (2008–2011), Bossi fervently embarked on crafting a new economic policy for the state. In pursuit of this goal, he proposed legislation to enable the reform of fiscal federalism, which was subsequently approved by parliament a year later.⁷⁰ However, this ambitious endeavour was put on hold following Berlusconi's resignation from office. In April 2012, amidst accusations of embezzling party funds by the financial police, Bossi resigned as the LN's federal secretary. Three months later, he was succeeded by Roberto Maroni. Since April 5, 2012, Bossi has held the title of honorary life federal president of the LN.⁷¹

⁶⁸ F. Ravelli, "La mano tremante, la voce roca l'emozione del condottiero ferito," *La Repubblica*, 7 March 2005, at <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2005/03/07/la-mano-tremante-la-voce-roca.html>, 7 March 2023. Cf. "Bossi, primo saluto in pubblico," *La Repubblica*, 20 September 2004, at <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2004/09/20/bossi-primo-saluto-in-pubblico.html>, 15 February 2023.

⁶⁹ "Il gran ritorno di Bossi a Roma Ora tutti federalisti nella Cdl," *La Repubblica* 16 November 2005.

⁷⁰ "Il federalismo è legge, la Lega esulta," *La Stampa*, 29 March 2009, at <https://www.lastampa.it/politica/2009/04/29/news/il-federalismo-e-legge-la-lega-esulta-1.37067667/>, 16 February 2023.

⁷¹ "Statuto della Lega Nord per l'Indipendenza della Padania approvato dal Congresso Federale in data 21 dicembre 2019 Modificato dal Consiglio Federale in data 29 gennaio 2021 ai sensi del punto

***I DID NOT CREATE THE LEAGUE TO DESTROY IT NOW.*
BOSSI'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE ACTIVITIES OF THE LEAGUE
UNDER MATTEO SALVINI'S LEADERSHIP (2013–2024)**

Umberto Bossi's resignation from the party presidency in 2012, amid his entanglement in corruption scandals, marked a retreat from political life and a decrease in public engagements. A year later, however, upon his re-election as a member of parliament, Bossi made a notable return to the political arena. Despite internal party tensions, in 2013, he made a prominent appearance at the traditional LN gathering in Pontida. During his inaugural speech, he rallied for the unity of Padanians and the revival of the 'struggle for freedom on all fronts'. *I did not create the League to destroy it now*, he declared.⁷² Expressing hope for a resurgence in power, the same year he also campaigned for the renewal of his mandate as the party's federal secretary in the LN primaries. However, his political vision failed to garner support from the lawmakers, particularly those aligned with Matteo Salvini, the conservative faction known as the *Salviniani*. They advocated for a new, national character for the group, rather than its regional focus.⁷³

Despite not playing a leading role in the League's activities since the second decade of the 21st century, Bossi has consistently maintained his stance that the issue of separatism should remain the most important point in the party's program. Hence, in the context of the regional consultative referenda held in Lombardy and Veneto on 22 October 2017, on increasing the autonomy of these regions, he advocated for maintaining the primacy of independence. Although he was enthusiastic about the results of the vote, he criticised Salvini's strategy of transforming the League into a radical-right party modelled on the French National Front. According to Bossi, the current party secretary's abandonment of old slogans calling for autonomy, independence, and separatism was motivated by Salvini's personal ambitions and the fear of hindering the party's growth in central and southern Italy.⁷⁴ Bossi has expressed his indignation towards the new version of the party's policy before. In a 2015 interview, he declared, *as long as I live, the League cannot be either national or Padanian-national, because the North is against what is Italian, against centralism, against Italian fascisms*.⁷⁵

Il delle Disposizioni Finali," 2021, art. 14, at https://www.leganord.org/phocadownload/ilmovimento/statuto/LN_Statuto_2021.pdf, 16 February 2023.

⁷² "Lega a Pontida, insulti tra bossiani e maroniani. Senatur: 'Non spacco il partito,'" *il Fatto Quotidiano*, 7 April 2013, at <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2013/04/07/lega-pontida-2-0-si-riparte-dalla-macroregione-tra-tensioni-e-divis>, 22 February 2022.

⁷³ "Lega: Salvini, guerriglia parlamentare contro amnistia," *Ansa*, 9 December 2013, at https://www.ansa.it/web/notizie/rubriche/politica/2013/12/07/Salvini-Bossi-futuro-Lega-mano-militanti_9741044.html, 22 February 2023. Cf. G. Passarelli, D. Tuorto, *La Lega di Salvini. Estrema destra di governo*, Bologna 2018.

⁷⁴ A. Carugati, "Bossi dopo il referendum: 'Zaia leader del centrodestra? No. Ma il vento del Nord è tornato a soffiare,'" *La Stampa*, 24 October 2017, at <https://www.lastampa.it/politica/2017/10/24/news/bossi-dopo-il-referendum-zaia-leader-del-centrodestra-no-ma-il-vento-del-nord-e-tornato-a-soffiare-1.34407699/>, 23 March 2022.

⁷⁵ C. Cartaldo, "Bossi: 'Noi anti-Italia. Così Salvini rimane solo,'" *Il Giornale*, 20 June 2015, at <https://>

A significant turning point in the League's activities came in 2018, when it achieved the best electoral result in its history (17.37%) and a radical change in the group's profile, symbolically expressed by removing the adjective 'northern' from the party's name. This was also the moment of Bossi's return to the historic Palazzo Madama as a senator, where he had begun his political career three decades earlier, in 1987. Given the aforementioned major ideological shift in the party, which has transitioned from a federalist-regionalist grouping to a strongly conservative, nationalist, and far-right one, the significance of Salvini's leadership may explain the extent to which the current party secretary is able to provide the League with ideological balance. The party is increasingly being described as highly incoherent, uncoordinated, and unreliable, especially since this tendency is legitimised by its historical founder and the supporters of the so-called 'old League' gathered around him.

In January 2020, after Salvini announced his decision to rebuild the nationalist movement 'Lega Salvini Premier', founded two years earlier on December 14, 2017, establishing its bodies throughout the country, the Federal Council of the 'old League' (the so-called *Carroccio*) elected the young Milanese parliamentarian Igor Iezzi as its new commissioner. This historic event had a significant impact not only on the party but also on Italian socio-political life, as confirmed by numerous public debates in the newspapers.⁷⁶ In an interview published on the front page of the daily *La Repubblica*, Bossi demonstrated his categorical opposition to Salvini's nationalist turn aimed at winning support in the south, which, in his view, had not brought any success anyway. At the same time, he expressed his intention to return to the issue of autonomy for northern Italy and to maintain positive relations with the left.⁷⁷

Characterised by an undoubted coherence of action, after the parliamentary elections on 25 September 2022, the 81-year-old Bossi was re-elected as a member of the Chamber of Deputies.⁷⁸ Regardless of age and health, the legendary 'father of the League', motivated mainly by the party's unsatisfactory election result and the rising

www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/bossi-noi-anti-italia-cos-salvini-rimane-solo-1142873.html, 21 April 2021.

⁷⁶ G. Laganà, "Addio Lega nord: Salvini chiude con il passato e lancia nuova sfida," *il Giornale*, 31 January 2020, at <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/addio-lega-nord-salvini-chiude-passato-e-lancia-nuova-sfida-1819712.html>, 6 June 2023.

⁷⁷ Currently the Lega Nord, created in 1989-1991 from a federation of various regional autonomist movements, essentially no longer exists. Despite the lack of official dissolution of the party for financial reasons, in practice, it has become only a kind of 'political shell.' On the other hand, it remains a symbol of the long-standing and ambitious, but also extremely controversial Padanian project, which has left a deep imprint on Italian socio-political life. G. Lerner, "Umberto Bossi: 'Salvini sbaglia, il nazionalismo fa perdere la Lega,'" *La Repubblica*, 2 February 2020, at https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/intervista/2020/02/02/news/umberto_bossi_salvini_sbaglia_il_nazionalismo_fa_perdere_la_lega_-247429961/, 22 February 2022.

⁷⁸ "Elezioni: Il Viminale si corregge, cambia l'attribuzione dei seggi. Bossi eletto in Lombardia," *Ansa*, 1 October 2022, at https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2022/09/28/elezioni-il-viminale-si-corregge-cambia-lattribuzione-dei-seggi.-bossi-eletto-in-lombardia_b7bd54cb-a22e-4673-b46c-7ec6dcdf5e5.html, 22 February 2023.

dissatisfaction of its members, attempted to implement the previously announced actions.⁷⁹ Less than a week after the elections, on 1 October 2022, he decided to establish an association to renew the original (northern) trend of the League.⁸⁰ As he declared: *We created the Committee of the North because it was time to rise [...] We suffered seeing the League's identity erased.*⁸¹ By proposing a return to the autonomist demands of the northern regions of Italy, Bossi demonstrated a fundamental incompatibility with Salvini's national strategy, resulting mainly from a different understanding of the nation. As he saw it, the party should continue the territorial policy he initiated four decades earlier. The primary goal of this autonomous political current is to regain the support and trust of northern Italian society, revive the League's 'blurred identity', and strengthen regional awareness in the country. The initiative to return to the issue of regional autonomy, and on a broader scale, to the concept of a 'free Padania', was enthusiastically embraced by thousands of supporters, while also receiving the endorsement of prominent League politicians, such as Roberto Maroni.⁸²

However, it is worth noting that the *Lega's* current leadership has distanced itself from this historical initiative of the party leader and taken steps to undermine it.⁸³ Although official statements offered assurances that there was no dispute between Salvini and Bossi, and the intervention was supposed to be merely a matter of legal premises, this situation clearly indicates the existence of two opposing currents within the party. The first, based on the persona of the 'combative' Bossi, is characterised by authenticity and coherence. The second, centred around Salvini, appears to be more pragmatic. There is no doubt that, while Bossi's regionalist politics reflected conviction and belief in ideals, Salvini's nationalist version of politics seems to be purely utilitarian.

⁷⁹ The League received 8.77% of the votes in the Chamber of Deputies and 8.85% in the Senate.

⁸⁰ It is important to emphasise that Bossi intends to 'revitalise' the original party stream within the League, rather than creating a specific new political entity. An example of such a new entity is the *Grande Nord* (Great North) party, founded in 2017 by former LN member Roberto Bernardelli ("Bossi dà vita a una corrente 'nordista' della Lega," *Agenzia Italia*, 1 October 2022, at <https://www.agi.it/politica/news/2022-10-01/lega-bossi-corrente-comitato-del-nord-18289111/>, 16 February 2023).

⁸¹ F. Stefanoni, "Bossi: 'ritorno' in chiave anti Salvini: 'Qui per rinnovare la Lega, non per distruggerla. Se cancelli l'identità muori,'" *Corriere della Sera*, 3 December 2022, at https://www.corriere.it/politica/22_dicembre_03/lega-bossi-giorno-comitato, 22 February 2023.

⁸² "Comitato del Nord, Umberto Bossi: 'Lega senza identità non può esistere, rinnoviamola,'" *Sky TG24*, 3 December 2023, at <https://tg24.sky.it/milano/2022/12/03/umberto-bossi-comitato-nord-giovenzano>, 22 February 2023.

⁸³ Immediately after the establishment of the Committee, Bossi's initiative was sharply criticized by the current party leadership of the *Lega per Salvini Premier*. As the direct successor of the LN, it issued a statement warning against the Committee's use of the party's name and symbol. It emphasised *the complete detachment of "Lega per Salvini Premier" from the initiative, promoted by a separate legal entity unaffiliated with the party*. It is worth noting that Bossi is not legally affiliated with the new faction of the League, but with the historical LN, which is a separate legal entity. "Lega, linea dura Salvini contro 'Comitato Nord' di Bossi," *adnkronos*, 28 October 2022, at https://www.adnkronos.com/lega-linea-dura-salvini-contro-comitato-nord-di-bossi_3Lrg1zjGtS5Ji4361FARD0?refresh_ce, 22 February 2022; "Salvini diffida Bossi: Comitato Nord non può usare simbolo Lega," *Sky TG 24*, 28 October 2022, at <https://tg24.sky.it/politica/2022/10/28/lega-salvini-bossi-simbolo-partito>, 22 February 2023.

This dualism and polarisation, characterised by a complex mix of legacy and political strategy, were clearly confirmed in the context of the European elections in June 2024, when the LN founder indicated his support for the independent FI candidate. As he stated, *the League has been betrayed*.⁸⁴ Salvini, commenting on the result of the European elections, attacked Bossi, accusing him of disrespect toward not only the secretary but the entire community.⁸⁵ A synthetic analysis of the leaders representing the LN over the years yields several conclusions. First, it demonstrates the diversity of messages directed by political leaders to voters. Despite the variety of populist discourse, a common feature is concern for the people, ranging from Bossi's vision, closely linked to the ethnic definition of the nation, to a group of citizens in a broad sense encompassing all Italians. Second, both leaders sought to assume a significant role as the 'father of the nation' – previously Padanian, currently Italian. This concept aligns well with the notion of concern for the fate of the nation, accompanied by charismatic leadership, previously regional, now centralised. Third, observing the party's political aspirations to gain power, its prominent status in the Italian party system is evident. In both cases, the leaders achieved a high level of relevance – they participated in government cabinets.

CONCLUSIONS

Analysing Umberto Bossi's four decades of activity, one must agree with Gianfranco Miglio's statement that his *first and fundamental characteristic is the ability to perceive and identify with the problems and aspirations of the inhabitants of the northern part of Italy*.⁸⁶ Undeniably, Bossi's project of creating a new nation and state, based on regional identities and permanently and profoundly opposed to the central Italian state, was rooted in firmly anti-unification ideas. On the other hand, there is no doubt that this Lombard activist was, and remains, a kind of local patriot who had, and still has, the greatness and power of his small homeland at heart. Initially Lombardy, then, taking particularistic localism to the extreme, the pseudo-homeland of Padania. This was clearly manifested in his activities, strongly rooted in the idea of regionalism, for a free and independent Padania and the slogans he proclaimed. It is important to emphasise that his charismatic leadership was characterised by unquestionable conviction and genuine faith in the Padanian idea. As Bossi himself stated:

The League is like a child, it is the fruit of love. I am convinced that this movement is the result of the generous efforts of thousands of men and women who love one another.

⁸⁴ F. Capurso, F. Moscatelli, "Strappo di Bossi e stoccata a Salvini: scelgo Forza Italia," *La Stampa*, 9 June 2024, at https://www.lastampa.it/speciale/esteri/elezioni-europee-2024/2024/06/09/news/elezioni_europee_bossi_lega_forza_italia_voto-14374795/, 10 June 2024.

⁸⁵ "Salvini, su Bossi dovrò ascoltare i militanti," *Ansa*, 10 June 2024, at https://www.ansa.it/lombardia/notizie/2024/06/10/salvini-su-bossi-dovro-ascoltare-i-militanti_e823fcf9-4652-4b2b-a838-674e8a76c763.html, 10 June 2024.

⁸⁶ R. Biorcio, *Il populismo nella politica italiana. Da Bossi a Berlusconi, da Grillo a Renzi*, Milano 2015, p. 49.

*They love the cities they live in, the nation they feel they belong to. The child has grown up and learned to walk on its own feet. However, it still has much work ahead to mature and fulfil its ambitions.*⁸⁷

Particularly noteworthy is Bossi's ability to establish relationships and resonate with the mindset of the social classes inhabiting northern Italy. Equally remarkable is his skill in combining various discourses and historical symbolism. The League's activities mirrored his own to such an extent that its members claimed, referring to their leader's actions, *when Bossi speaks, it is as if I were speaking*.⁸⁸ There is no doubt that the influence of his leadership on the entire party was fundamental, both during the founding period and throughout the processes of changing its operation.

Bossi managed to capture the attention and engage the public through his controversial and often exceeding socially normative behaviour. As he himself admitted, *I have to be a bit of a clown on stage and use strong words, because that is the only way I can attract many supporters*.⁸⁹ His speaking style, way of behaving, and attire are noteworthy. A distinctive feature is his public displays, reminiscent of the medieval knight Alberto da Giussano – a raised hand or a clenched fist accompanied by a determined gaze. These aspects of his personality became a sort of assurance of authenticity, as well as the appreciation and celebration of the folk lifestyle. For Bossi, the cultural reference model has always been diligence, honesty, and resourcefulness – the virtues of 'ordinary people', contrasting with the bureaucratic management of central state authorities. As he noted, *It may be a naive, simplistic belief, but I feel that where there are people, there is good. Evil lurks in the palaces of power or in the mafia dens*.⁹⁰ It was primarily Bossi's charismatic leadership that enabled the League to achieve electoral success.

Although his controversial rhetoric often polarised society, reinforcing the traditional divide between Italy's North and South, Bossi remains a key figure for understanding contemporary Italian politics and culture. He serves as a reminder us of the significance of regionalism and ongoing dialogue in a multicultural country like Italy. Bossi's case also exemplifies the true significance of political representation. It was primarily his involvement and actions, rather than the party's, that profoundly influenced the concept guiding the party's formation four decades ago, and his withdrawal from politics led to its gradual decline. Analysis of his case enables a deeper understanding not only of the role of leaders but also of mechanisms applicable in other regionalist contexts in Europe. This is especially crucial amid the contemporary challenges associated with globalisation and local identities.

⁸⁷ "Lega: 35 anni fa nasceva il partito del Nord, poi la svolta nazionale," *Sky TG24*, 12 April 2019, at <https://tg24.sky.it/politica/approfondimenti/lega-nord-35-anni-anniversario>, 27 February 2022.

⁸⁸ R. Biorcio, *La Lega Lombarda come attore politico: dal federalismo al populismo regionalista*, in R. Manheimer (ed.) *La Lega Lombarda*, Milano 1991, p. 70.

⁸⁹ Quoted in A. Signore, A. Trocino, *Razza padana...*, p. 187.

⁹⁰ U. Bossi, D. Vimercati *Vento dal Nord...*, p. 187.

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