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Antimigrant Sentiment Fuels Rise of Italy's League

Once regional party consolidates northern strongholds but also makes gains further south



League leader Matteo Salvini campaigning earlier this month at a street market in Milan, capital of Lombardy, a party stronghold. PHOTO: ALBERICO/FOTOGRAMMA/ROPI/ZUMA PRESS

By *Eric Sylvers* and *Pietro Lombardi*

March 7, 2018 5:30 a.m. ET

BOFFALORA, Italy—Luca Mazzeo, a 29-year-old university student, says he has watched many families in this small town struggle to make ends meet during Italy's long economic downturn.

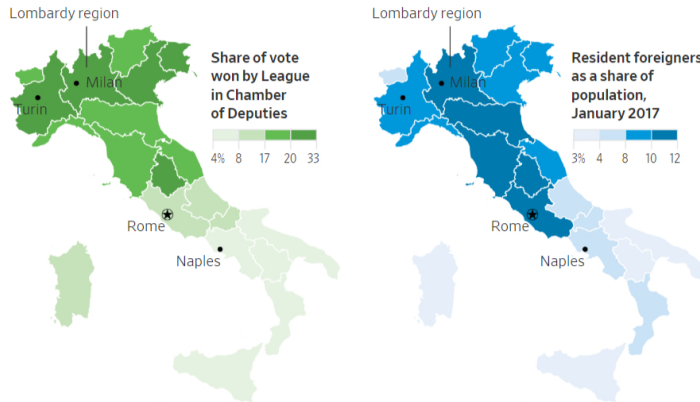
At the same time, he says he is angered that the government in Rome has sent tens of thousands of migrants to be settled in the surrounding towns and cities of Lombardy—so many that the northern region now hosts more new arrivals than any other in Italy.

Boffalora has resisted pressure to accept any migrants, and Mr. Mazzeo wants it to stay that way. So he cast his vote on Sunday for the anti-immigrant League party.

"First we have to take care of our people," he said. "The priority should be to help the unemployed and struggling families, not accepting people who have come here illegally."

Migrant Fatigue

The anti-immigrant League did best in Italy's regions with the highest concentrations of resident foreigners.



Sources: Italian Ministry of the Interior (votes); Istat (foreigners)

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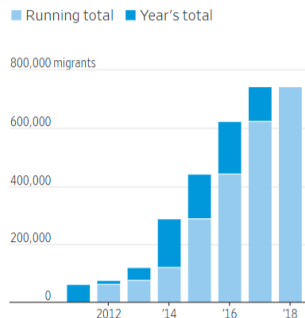
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Such sentiment helps explain how the League, formerly called the Northern League, has returned from the political wilderness with an “Italians first” message that resonated strongly in the party’s wealthy northern strongholds, but also in Italy’s center and even in the deep south—a region the party once vilified.

Unease over immigration, along with promises to slash taxes and lower the retirement age, powered the League to its best-ever performance in a national election, giving it nearly 18% of the popular vote and tripling its parliamentary representation.

That success puts the League at the helm of its conservative coalition, which drew 37% of the popular votes. **If the alliance drafts enough support from other parties to form a government**, party leader Matteo Salvini could claim the premier’s seat.

Migrants who reached Italy’s shores



Note: 2018 through March 6
Source: Interior Ministry

“There is a prime-minister candidate—and it’s me—and there is a program that will pull Italy out of the quicksand,” he said Tuesday.

Mr. Salvini’s nativist message echoes that of other European nationalists such as France’s Marine Le Pen and Hungary’s Viktor Orban. For millions of Italian voters, it fell on open ears.

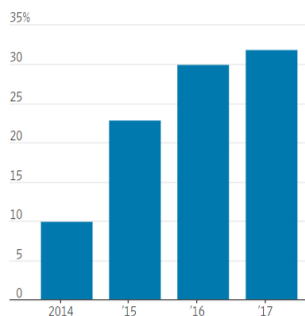
The face of Italy has changed enormously in recent years. The country is on the front lines of Europe’s migration crisis. Nearly 750,000 seaborne migrants have landed on its shores since 2011, hundreds of thousands of whom have swelled Italy’s population of undocumented migrants.

That influx is just a part of a generalized rise in Italy’s foreign population, which has tripled since 2000. Especially in recent years, those newcomers have landed in a country with a sluggish economy and sharply rising poverty.

Mr. Salvini’s anti-immigration rhetoric dovetailed with his skepticism about the European Union, which many Italians say abandoned them in the face of huge waves of arrivals. Mr. Salvini calls the single currency a mistake destined to disappear, and the League has promised to rewrite EU treaties on migration, monetary policy and other issues that it says penalize Italy.

Sunday’s victory marks a **dramatic comeback** for a party that won just 4% of the national vote in parliamentary elections in 2013, after which Mr. Salvini took over.

Percentage of Italians who cited immigration as a major concern



Source: Ipsos Mori

The League has held on in part thanks to the grass-roots organization previous League leaders built in small towns and cities across Italy’s north. It anchored its initial success there by promising to pursue the independence of the north, which the League’s founders dubbed a separate nation called Padania. “Roman Thieves!” was a common refrain at rallies to denounce the high taxes imposed by the central government in Rome.

The League has held on to the governorships of Lombardy and the Veneto, home to almost a quarter of Italy’s population, and has local control of many small towns and cities there. Those footholds gave it a base for launching its restart.






“The League was built to last,” wrote Duncan McDonnell, a professor of European politics at Griffith University in Brisbane in an email. “And it duly has.”

Its success hasn’t come just on the back of the immigration issue. The League’s Alberto Gusmeroli won popularity as mayor of the small town of Arona on Lake Maggiore by among other initiatives turning a parking lot into a popular central pedestrian square and cleaning up the lake front. On Sunday, he was elected to parliament following a campaign that

emphasized his party’s promise to enact a flat tax of 15% to replace a graduated system with a highest individual bracket of 43%.

“We are out there meeting people and shaking their hands all the time, rain or shine,” he said Tuesday as locals stopped to congratulate him.

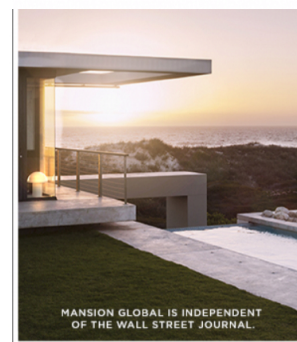
Besides tightening its grip on the north on Sunday, the League even gained as much as 10% in some parts of the south, once the target of the party’s evulsive, ladan chants

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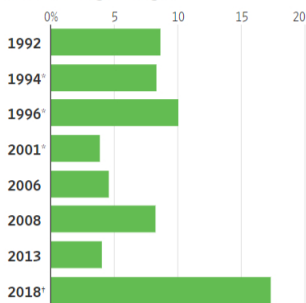
Alberto Gusmeroli, mayor of Arona, greeting constituents on Tuesday, two days after winning election to Italy’s parliament. PHOTO: ALBERTO GUSMEROLI

in some parts of the south, once the target of the party's explosive local claims.

A tireless campaigner, Mr. Salvini—who publicly apologized to southerners for his earlier coarse comments about them—made a habit of wearing sweatshirts bearing the name of the town he was visiting.

In Gela, a small city in Sicily, Max Vella had to shut his small business six months ago, blaming Italian tax rates that are among Europe's highest. He says the flat tax could help fight tax evasion and spark new economic growth on an island with a jobless rate of 22%, twice the national average.

Chamber of Deputies electoral results for the Northern League/League



*Refers to proportional representation *Projection
Source: Italian Ministry of the Interior

Mr. Salvini “wants to bring moderation and democracy to Italy, where there are no rules,” said the 40-year-old. On Sunday, nearly 8% of voters in Gela cast ballots for the League, compared with 0.1% in 2013. The right-wing coalition registered a win in Gela and the League gained a handful of seats in the south.

Mr. Salvini’s message also resonated in southern areas such as Rosarno in Calabria, where undocumented immigrants living in dire conditions pick fruit for as little as €15 (\$18.50) a day.

“We face the problems stemming from [immigration] every day,” said Antonio Recupero, a local League activist. Echoing a favorite refrain of Mr. Salvini, he said, “We want

to help them in their countries.”

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