

Explaining Matteo Salvini's support for the new Italian government

At first glance, a pro-EU government led by the former President of the European Central Bank would appear a poor fit for a Eurosceptic party. Yet this has not stopped Matteo Salvini's League from endorsing Mario Draghi's new Italian government. Giovanni de Ghantuz Cubbe argues that while the League's support for Draghi may seem a curious turn of events given Salvini's long history of Euroscepticism, it is in keeping with the ambiguous relationship the party has had with Europe since the 1990s.

One of the more surprising features of Italy's new pro-EU government, led by former President of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi, is that it has the support of Matteo Salvini's League – a party usually associated with Euroscepticism.

As [Piero Ignazi highlights](#), the League's lust for power goes some way toward providing an explanation for this support. Salvini made a major strategic mistake in 2019 when he [opted to leave the first government led by Giuseppe Conte](#). The aim was to capitalise on favourable polling by forcing new elections, but the plan backfired and pushed the party into opposition. By endorsing Draghi, the League has now found a route back into government.

An ambiguous relationship

One question that remains unanswered is how Salvini's strong Euroscepticism can be reconciled with his support for Draghi. Some insights can be derived from the League's historical approach to European integration. Indeed, the party has always taken a distinctly ambiguous approach toward Europe. This has been evident in four distinct periods of the League's history.

When the party was first established as the Northern League in the 1990s, it expressed clear support for European integration. Its founder and former leader, Umberto Bossi, interpreted the end of the Cold War as the right opportunity for the local and regional entities of the North to free themselves from the Italian state. Bossi appreciated that globalisation and European integration were contributing to the marginalisation of centralised nation states and supported the EU on this basis.

From this foundation, a second period can be discerned in which Italy's entry into Europe's Economic and Monetary Union made clear that the Northern League's goal of emancipating Italy's northern regions through the integration process was no longer possible. Between 1996 and 1998, in the leadup to the launch of the euro, the party endorsed a hard form of Euroscepticism. Far from the initial vision of a 'Europe of regions', the Northern League now conceived of the EU as a vehicle for big capital – a 'monster' that fostered neither democracy nor prosperity.



Matteo Salvini with Italian President Sergio Mattarella, Credit: Presidenza della Repubblica (Public Domain)

In 2011, the appointment of former European Commissioner Mario Monti as Italian Prime Minister initiated a third period. The Northern League [seized on the opportunity](#) to position itself as one of the principal parties of opposition to European integration. Monti became the symbol of a 'Europe of austerity' and the dominance of financial powers over politics. However, the party stopped short of positions that were outwardly anti-European. Rather than opposing the European Union per se, it directed most of its criticism toward the allegedly undemocratic structures that underpinned the integration process.

The election of Salvini as leader in 2013 ushered the party into a fourth period. Under Salvini, the League developed an increasingly radical stance against the EU, particularly from 2017 onwards. Interpreting the success of populist parties across Europe as a chance to establish an alliance of populists against Brussels, Salvini took part in a meeting of populist leaders in Koblenz that sought to organise coordinated opposition to the EU with the aim of ousting the "[Merckels, Hollandes and Renzis](#)" of European politics. As Minister of the Interior, he continued this fight from within government, using the migration crisis as a point of conflict between Italy and Europe. More recently, during the Covid-19 pandemic he labelled the EU a "[viper's nest](#)" and announced his intention to "leave Europe, if necessary".

With this stated, the essential ambiguity of the League's relationship with Europe has not changed. As an example, compare the party's [manifesto for the 2018 Italian general election](#) and the [agreement](#) it subsequently signed with the Five Star Movement to form the first Conte government. While the manifesto proposed to "renegotiate all the treaties that restrict our full and legitimate sovereignty" and "go back to the European Economic Community that existed before the Maastricht Treaty", the coalition agreement signed just a few months later stated that "considering the circumstances and the problems which have occurred during recent years, Italy requires the complete realisation of the goals established in 1992 in the Maastricht Treaty and confirmed in 2007 in the Lisbon Treaty".

Salvini and Draghi

The pattern that emerges from this summary of the League's approach to Europe is not therefore blanket Euroscepticism, but rather one in which the party has always varied its platform depending on the circumstances. This is a trend that has continued under Salvini's leadership.

The League has oscillated between [hard Euroscepticism](#), which implies outright rejection of the entire integration project, and soft Euroscepticism, which allows parties to avoid taking a definitive position against the EU while opposing specific features of the integration process. Similarly, the party has alternated between [ideological and strategic Euroscepticism](#) – at times presenting Euroscepticism as an ideologically essential component of its platform, yet in other moments embracing Euroscepticism only according to pragmatic and opportunistic needs.

In this context, the decision of Salvini to support Draghi was not out of step with the League's history. Rather, it was a strategic decision that is in keeping with the party's previous approach to the EU. It nevertheless marks the beginning of a fifth period, with Salvini and the League embarking on a form of precarious cooperation with a pro-EU government. If they once again abandon power and return to the fight against Europe, few will be surprised. Yet given the essential ambiguity that lies at the heart of the League's relationship with Europe, it is difficult to predict which way the story may turn next.

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