

# THE LEAGUE (LEGA, LEGA NORD, THE NORTHERN LEAGUE)

**IMPACT:** Northern League (Lega Nord) is a far-right political party in Italy that rebranded itself as the League (Lega) in the run-up to the 2018 general election. Umberto Bossi established the party in 1991 as a federation of six regional parties in north and north-central Italy and it was led by Roberto Maroni until 2013. Under the leadership of Matteo Salvini, the League amplified anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiments. In southern Italy, the League recently established a sister party named Us with Salvini and ran for election under the title “Salvini Premier.” In the 2018 general election, the League was the third-largest party and formed a coalition with the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the Democratic Party (PD). After the 2019 European Parliament election, it became the largest party and co-founded the the anti-Muslim and far-right parliamentary group Identity and Democracy.

- The League originally formed as a regional party that advocated the secession of northern Italy and its full name was the Northern League for the Independence of Padania. The party has been represented in parliament since 1992, but did not become successful until Matteo Salvini assumed leadership in 2013. Under Salvini the party increasingly shifted to the right and deprioritized northern independence. **In 2018, Salvini rebranded the party with a new logo, new name (League) and added the slogan Salvini premier (Salvini for Prime Minister).**
- In the 2014 European Parliament election, the League placed fourth with 6.15 percent of the vote but in the 2019 election it placed first with 34.26 percent. **In the 2018 Italian elections, the League became the third largest political party with 17.69 percent and fell only shortly behind the Democratic party with 18.9 percent and the populist Five Star Movement with 32.22 percent.** As a result, the League joined a coalition government and Salvini became one of two vice prime ministers and minister of the interior. As minister of the interior, he was responsible for policies on immigration and religious minorities. The September 2019 dissolution of the coalition government placed Salvini back in opposition but the League won the Umbrian region presidency in the October 2019 regional elections, ending half a century of left-wing rule.
- One year after the 2014 European Parliament election, the party became a founding member of the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENL) group. After the 2019 European Parliament election, the League cofounded the Identity and Democracy (ID) group, alongside the French National Rally, the Danish People’s Party, the Freedom Party of Austria, the Conservative People's Party of Estonia, the Finns Party, the Belgian Vlaams Belang, the Czech Freedom and Direct Democracy party, and Alternative for Germany. Outside of its European parliamentary group, the League also has contacts with the far-right Spanish Vox, the Hungarian Fidesz, and the Polish Law and Justice party. In March 2017 the Northern League signed a cooperation agreement with Russian President Vladimir Putin’s political party United Russia and a similar agreement was signed between United Russia and the Freedom Party of Austria. In 2019, rumors appeared online insinuating the League had received funding from Russia.
- According to a Brookings working paper on Muslims in the West and the rise of populism in Italy, **“The League uses an ethnonational definition to describe the in-group and the people that the party wants to defend and represent (the Italian people, the nation, the country) and those deemed to be enemies of the party and the state (all defined in terms of identity and culture as non-Italians, non-Europeans, non-Christians).** This dichotomy is even stronger vis-a-vis Muslim immigrants, who are seen as endorsing a culture completely different from both Italy’s and Europe’s.”
- **The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) has repeatedly criticized the racist outlook of the League.** It reported in 2002 that “exponents of the Lega Nord [...] have been particularly active in resorting to racist and xenophobic propaganda,

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although members of other parties have also made use of xenophobic or otherwise intolerant political discourse.” In a 2006 report, ECRI observed that **“some members of the Northern League have intensified the use of racist and xenophobic discourse.”** The commission also noted that “in December 2004, the first instance Court of Verona found six local representatives of Lega Nord guilty of incitement to racial hatred in connection with a campaign organised in order to send a group of Sinti away from a local temporary settlement,” but the Court of Cassation cancelled the sentence in 2007.

- **The 2016 European Islamophobia Report (EIR) observed that Islamophobia in Italy was especially “present [...] in the far right and particularly the Lega Nord party and Fratelli d’Italia.”** During the 2017 regional elections in the Lombardy region, **the prime candidate of the Northern League declared that there is a “risk that the white race disappears and is replaced by migrants.”** Italian sociologists Alfredo Alietti and Dario Padovan argue that anti-Muslim attitudes are spread by various opinion leaders, bloggers, newspapers, Facebook pages and leading figures of far-right parties and movements including the ultraconservative sectors of the Catholic church; mass media (the right-wing newspapers La Verità, Il Giornale, and Libero); and political parties such as the Northern League, Fratelli d’Italia, CasaPound, and Forza Nuova. After Salvini became the leader of the Northern League, the party focused on anti-Muslim mobilization. **At the end of 2014, Salvini announced the creation of a new manifesto called the People’s League, which advocated the banning of mosques in Italy and declared that Muslims were “trying to impose a way of life incompatible with ours.”**
- Throughout the course of 2015 and alongside other far-right parties such as CasaPound and Forza Nuova, the Northern League launched initiatives and demonstrations against Islam and immigration from Muslim countries. **According to the EIR, the Northern League filed several motions in municipal and regional councils to oppose the Muslim community’s religious freedom in 2015.** In the Northern Lombardy region, the party launched an initiative to take a census of Islamic associations. The Northern League also tried to initiate a public consultation on the opportunity to build a mosque in Castelfranco. **All of the motions were seen as unconstitutional and thus blocked by the governing parties.**
- **Representatives of the League have frequently attempted to construct a nexus between (male) Muslims and sexual offenses.** In May 2016, Salvini added a section named “Sex and Trash” to his newly launched website The Populist. According to the EIR on Italy, his website “devotes ample space to news that cast[s] the Left, migrants and social centres in a bad light: irreverent cartoons of the Pope, foreigners occupying houses and beating up their employers, even foreigners who massacre an Italian after urinating in the street.” In July 2016, the Northern League Mayor of Cascina, Susanna Ceccardi, published a cartoon on her Facebook account depicting a young blonde woman holding a shield with the words “Europe” while kicking a Muslim depicted with a pig’s head, beard, and Quran. A vignette bears the title “Wake up Europe!” Ceccardi responded to the backlash that followed: “As I am the mayor I think I have to fight with even more force to oppose Islamic terrorism.” In 2016 Salvini attacked Pope Francis and the Italian state for inviting the Italian Muslim community to a prayer after the brutal murder of Father Jacques Hamel who was beheaded by extremists in Normandy. **Salvini declared that “Islam is not compatible with our freedoms and our rights. Those who do not understand this are ignorant or complicit!”**
- **According to reporting in Al Jazeera, “Islam isn’t formally recognised in Italy, despite being the country’s largest religious minority ... [and] as a result, mosques cannot receive public funds, religious holidays and weddings are not recognised, and there’s no law governing the establishment of places of worship.”** In September 2016 the Northern League presented to the Chamber of Deputies a bill proposing that Muslim associations could only build new mosques after providing funding origins and presenting financial statements, stating that funds should not come from institutions with “unclear

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ideologies.” When Muslims were given the permission to use a former tribunal site as a place of prayer during Ramadan in May of 2016, the secretary of Cantú’s [Northern League](#) opposed the [decision](#) and argued that the place could become a real mosque.

- Where the League held power in regional districts, it implemented anti-Muslim regulations. **In 2017, several town councils governed by the Northern League unlawfully implemented ordinances to prohibit the wearing of the niqab and hijab.**
- Migration and refugees featured heavily in the political agenda during the March 2018 national elections and Salvini drew distinctively on anti-Muslim rhetoric. Salvini [claimed](#), “Once we have the government, we will regulate every Islamic presence in the country. Exactly as in difficult times Oriana Fallaci claimed, we are under attack. Our culture, society, customs, lifestyle are at risk (...) The skin colour is not so important, there is a real danger: centuries of history that risk disappearing if the Islami[z]ation prevails.” **Salvini built on the claims of anti-Muslim conspirator Fallaci, who asserted that Islam was the “new Nazi-fascism.”** This rhetoric is similar to that of white supremacists such as [Anders Behring Breivik](#), who committed the [2011 Norway attacks](#) and called for a natural defense against an alleged Islamization.
- **During the 2018 national elections, Salvini evoked ideas of a Muslim takeover of European countries similar to those of Fallaci and Breivik, stating: “The cultural issue is if Islam, nowadays, can be compatible with our values, with our freedom and with our Constitution.** I have strong doubts .... The fact that Islam represents a risk is obvious if the Islamic declaration of human rights stipulates that Islamic justice prevails over national justice. This is a problem for me, I’d rather not be like in Great Britain, with the Islamic courts instead of the English courts.” According to [Full Fact](#), an independent fact checking charity in the UK, “While there are undoubtedly lots of different councils and tribunals dealing with Sharia principles, they aren’t courts of law.” **Furthermore, Sharia councils, which “make decisions on purely religious matters” cannot “overrule the regular courts.”**
- The League has faced criticism for its response to COVID-19, particularly in Lombardy. **According to reporting in Reuters, Lombardy “remains one of the world’s worst-hit regions, accounting for half of Italy’s 26,000 dead.”** The League has also witnessed a drop in national support due to its failure to respond effectively. The Center for American Progress [reports](#) that support for Salvini and the League “fell from 34 percent in last year’s European elections to 26 percent in recent polling.”
- In June 2020, Salvini and members of Italy’s conservative opposition led an anti-government protest in Rome. **Along with Giorgia Meloni of the Brothers of Italy and MEP Antonio Tajani of Forza Italia, hundreds of people [marched](#) against the government’s response to the coronavirus pandemic.**