

The League of Matteo Salvini: Fostering and Exporting a Modern Mass-Party Grounded on “Phygital” Activism

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Abstract

The Lega Nord (LN – Northern League) has undergone a profound process of transformation since 2013, by replacing its historical regionalist populism with a new state-wide populist radical right outlook. However, very little is known about how such transformation impacted its organizational model, particularly the mass-party features that characterized it under its founding leader, Umberto Bossi. This article explores the organizational evolution of the party under Matteo Salvini by means of a qualitative in-depth analysis of 41 semi-structured interviews with representatives of the League from four regions (Calabria, Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy and Veneto) and primary documents. It underlines that the LN was turned into a disempowered and politically inactive “bad company”, charged with the task of paying the debts of the old party, while its structure, resources and personnel were poured into a new state-wide organization called League for Salvini Premier. This new League has not simply maintained the key features of the mass-party in the LN’s historical strongholds but also pioneered a modern form of this organizational model grounded on the continuous interaction between digital and physical activism, i.e. phygital activism, which boosts the party’s ability to reach out to the electorate by delivering the image that the League is constantly on the ground. The League has sought to export this modern interpretation of the mass-party in the South; however, in that area its organizational development remains at an embryonic stage, and the party’s nationalization strategy has so far produced a “quasi-colonial” structure dominated by, and dependent on, the Northern elite.

Keywords

centralization, League, Mass-party, Northern League, party nationalization, party organization, phygital activism, populist radical right, Matteo Salvini

1. Introduction

For much of its existence, the Lega Nord (LN – Northern League) was led by a Lombard elite dominated by its founding leader, Umberto Bossi, who concentrated his efforts on building a mass-party inspired by the organizational principles and practices of Leninist parties. While the existing literature has provided excellent analyses of the mass-party features of the “old” LN (e.g. Albertazzi, 2016; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015; McDonnell & Vampa, 2016), very little is known about how the disempowerment of the old LN in favour of a new, state-wide, organization called Lega per Salvini Premier (LSP – League for Salvini Premier) impacted on its long-standing organizational model.

This article fills this gap by relying on the qualitative in-depth analysis of 41 semi-structured interviews with representatives of the League in Calabria, Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy and Veneto, along with primary documents. In line with the analytical framework outlined in the introduction to this special issue on right-wing populist parties (Albertazzi & van Kessel, 2021), this article explores the organizational structure of the new League, shedding light on how it attracts new members and activists, the role of the internet and social media in party organization and activism, the reasons to grow an active base of activists, the degree of centralization of power and internal democracy.

This paper is structured as follows. After a section outlining the research design and methods adopted, it outlines the historical evolution of the LN, explaining how the latter was transformed into a disempowered “bad company” in favour of the new League. Then, it explains how this new League has sought to foster and modernize the mass-party organizational model inherited from the old LN in the historical strongholds in the North, while seeking to export its key features to the whole country. The article subsequently outlines the hyper-centralized nature of the new League and the virtual lack of internal democracy, features that are interlinked with the long-standing imperative of democratic centralism that characterized Bossi’s LN since its origins.

This article shows that Salvini’s League has successfully developed a modern conception of the mass-party grounded on the key principle of “phygital” activism, which combines *physical* activism on the ground and *digital* activism, suggesting that a traditional organizational model can be updated by taking advantage of new technologies. Phygital activism is well-oiled and fostered in Northern regions, where it enables the League to perform the traditional functions of the mass-party model in a faster, more efficient and immediate way. This modern conception of the mass-party model is consolidated in the North, and has been exported to the South. However, the strategy of organizational nationalization of the League is still in its infancy, and territorial penetration in the South is being pursued in a “quasi-colonial” way by Salvini and his most loyal collaborators, raising doubts about its future sustainability.

2. Research Design and Methods

By adopting the analytical framework outlined in the introduction to this special issue (see Albertazzi & van Kessel, 2021), this article tackles two major points. First, it assesses whether the new League has maintained key features of the mass-party organizational model, which were evident during Bossi’s era, despite the profound change of its ideology and geographic scope under the leadership of Matteo Salvini. Second, the article explores the strategy of organizational nationalization of a (formerly) regionalist party which, for much of its history, had found its *raison d’être* in a delimited geographic area (i.e. Northern Italy). Hence, the League as a case-study can substantially enhance our understanding of how parties implement “strategic decisions of adopting organizational changes in order to pursue their goals” (Borz & Janda, 2020, p. 3) as well as that of party nationalization strategies (e.g. Borz and De Miguel, 2017).

In this respect, it is worth recalling that Stockemer et al. (2018) argued that the study of the demand-side of populist radical right politics can be greatly improved through in-depth analyses providing room for voices from within the party. This article maintains that focusing on the attitudes, views, and perspectives from within the party is even more

pressing when it comes to the study of party organization, an essential feature of the supply-side of populist politics (see Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2016).

Hence, methodologically speaking, this paper focuses on the detailed analysis of party statutes (Lega per Salvini Premier, 2018; Lega Nord, 2015, 2021) and regulations (Lega per Salvini Premier, 2021) and, in particular, on the qualitative in-depth analysis of 41 semi-structured interviews with representatives and former representatives of the League in Calabria, Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy and Veneto, conducted between November 2019 and June 2021. These regions were chosen to maximize variation in terms of party history, strength and organizational development: the historical power centre of the League (Lombardy), its current electoral stronghold (Veneto), an area in which the left has historically been dominant (Emilia-Romagna), and a Southern region where the League has attempted to export its organizational model (Calabria).

Interviewees were purposefully sampled: snowball chains developed with those who agreed to be interviewed as well as with the help of the party, and participants were sought until theoretical saturation was reached (Kvale, 1996). All interviewees matched the criteria for purposive sampling as they are in a privileged position to shed light on the research questions outlined above. All the interviewees occupy or occupied different roles within the League at the various territorial levels of the party organization and/or represent(ed) the League in local, regional or national institutions (see the online appendix for details).

3. From the LN to the Division of Labour between Two Leagues: the “Good” and the “Bad” Company

The LN finds its roots in the mobilization of regionalist parties in Northern Italy since the late 1970s, which eventually merged in 1991 under the undisputed leadership of Bossi. Since then, the LN has enjoyed uninterrupted parliamentary presence, making it the oldest parliamentary actor in the country. Even though its electoral performance has fluctuated over time (Figures 1 and 2), the impact of the LN on Italian politics has been remarkable, as shown by its key role in coalition dynamics (Zulianello, 2019) and by its repeated participation in national governments (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015).

Figure 1. Vote share (in %) in general elections (1992–2018, Chamber of Deputies). Source: Electoral archive of the Italian Interior Ministry.

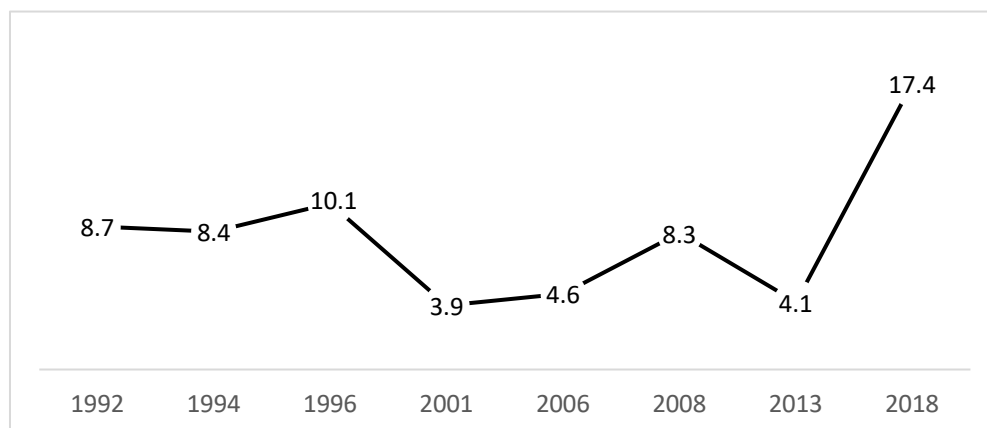
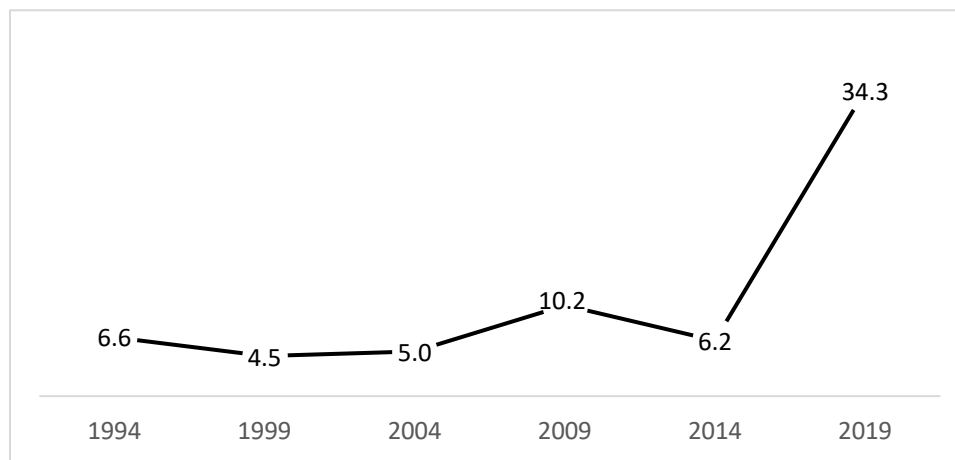


Figure 2. Vote share (in %) in European elections (1994–2019). Source: Electoral archive of the Italian Interior Ministry.



The LN played a critical role in the collapse of the party system that dominated Italian politics in the post-war period by bringing to the fore the so-called “Northern Question”. The LN successfully activated a dormant centre-periphery cleavage counterpoising the interest and values of the “hard-working” Northerners against those of the “vexatious” central state and the “lazy” Southerners: thanks to such features, the ideational profile of the party was constituted, for much of its history, by a populist form of regionalism (Newth, 2019; cf. Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015).

Bossi was the uncontested leader of the LN until 2012, when a scandal regarding the misappropriation of party funds led to his resignation. Following the short-lived leadership of Roberto Maroni, Matteo Salvini became the new Federal Secretary in 2013, and his election represented a key discontinuity in comparison with the past as he did not belong to the founding group of the party. As Albertazzi et al. (2018, p. 662) underline, under Salvini “the regionalist cause was dropped ... thus transforming in a most profound way one of the key components of the LN’s ideology”. Even though there are good reasons to identify populism and nativism as elements of continuity between the “old” and “new” League (Newth, 2019), the ideological trajectory undertaken by Salvini’s League has made it a fully-fledged populist radical right actor (Albertazzi et al., 2018; cf. Mudde, 2007, pp. 56–57). Before the 2018 general elections the adjective “Northern” was even dropped from the electoral symbol of the party: on that occasion the League made considerable inroads across the peninsula, including in the South (Albertazzi & Zulianello, 2021), establishing itself as the leading force within the centre-right, with 17.4% of the votes and outpolling Forza Italia for the first time (14.0%). Subsequently, it even became the most voted-for party in the country (34.3% in the 2019 EU elections).

The abandonment of regionalist populism has been accompanied by the effort to export an organizational model tailored to a territorially defined area (the so-called Padania) to the whole Italian territory. The first steps in developing a state-wide organization were undertaken shortly after Salvini’s election as party secretary of the LN, as in 2014 he launched a sister party called Noi con Salvini (NcS – Us with Salvini) to contest sub-national elections in Southern Italy.

Meanwhile, the LN was facing increasing pressures from Italian authorities, who were investigating the scandal related to the misappropriation of party funds for private purposes that had led to Bossi's resignation in 2012. The amount of the fraud was estimated in €49m by judicial authorities, and to prevent the risk of bankruptcy, Roberto Calderoli exited the parliamentary group of the LN in the Senate in 2017 and deposited the statute of a new political actor called League for Salvini Premier (from now onwards just "new League" or "Salvini's League"), which was published in the Official Gazette. This move, orchestrated by the Federal Council of the LN together with Calderoli, enabled the new League to be entitled to receive indirect public funding as well as private contributions, hence providing a "Plan b" in case of an eventual freezing and confiscation of LN funds by judicial authorities.

The establishment of a new League resulted in a unique organizational parallelism: in the North, its structures, resources and personnel *de facto* coincided with those of the old LN; in the South, the sister party NcS *de facto* dissolved into the new League. Nevertheless, such a parallelism had left unsolved the issue of protecting the new League from the burden of the €49m debt – which the party had told prosecutors it would pay back in seven decades, in yearly instalments of 600,000 euros a year – as well as formally transferring the members and structures of the LN into the new political actor. These issues were tackled in an extraordinary Federal Congress of the LN (21 December 2019), which unanimously approved a number of major changes to the Federal Statute, including the possibility of dual membership (i.e. in both the Leagues). Such changes established a division of labour between two distinct entities: on the one hand, a "good company", the new League, which is the only political and electoral actor left; on the other, a "bad company", the LN, which was "frozen" and continued to exist only to repay the already mentioned debt, mostly through "the voluntary contributions of its parliamentarians" (interview 4).

The final steps in the restructuring of the old LN occurred in early 2020. Salvini "froze" all the federal bodies of the disempowered LN, while appointing one of his most loyal collaborators (Igor Iezzi) as its federal commissioner to prevent any potential resurgence of the "old" guard. Subsequently, through a series of notarial acts, the regional branches of the old LN were re-founded as regional branches of the new League, led by commissioners directly appointed by Salvini and loyal to him.

4. A Modern Mass-Party in the North, a Wannabe Mass-Party in the South

The overall organizational logic of Salvini's new League remains shaped by Bossi's very specific interpretation of the mass-party model: that of "a party with a Marxist mould" (interview 31). While inviting the reader to the abundant and rich literature on Bossi's LN for details (e.g. Albertazzi, 2016; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015; Cento Bull & Gilbert, 2001; McDonnell & Vampa 2016), for the present purposes it suffices to highlight that Bossi focused his efforts on developing an organization characterized by the essential features of mass-parties, that is one characterised by a grassroots activist base, widespread territorial presence and wide-ranging activities for party members, the latter encapsulated into a political community shaped by ideology. Bossi's LN was characterized by the paramount importance of physical and territorial activism, rigid screening mechanisms for activists' recruitment and the formation of representatives through cadre schools, as well

as by the development of a centralized party machine built upon the organizational imperative of democratic centralism.

In the North, Salvini's League inherited the organizational legacy of the LN, and still carries out the traditional functions and activities characterizing the mass-party model by reinterpreting it in a modern way. In the South, the League is better understood as a "wannabe" mass-party at an embryonic stage of development, as it is trying to replicate the organizational features and practices it has consolidated in the North, but not without difficulties.

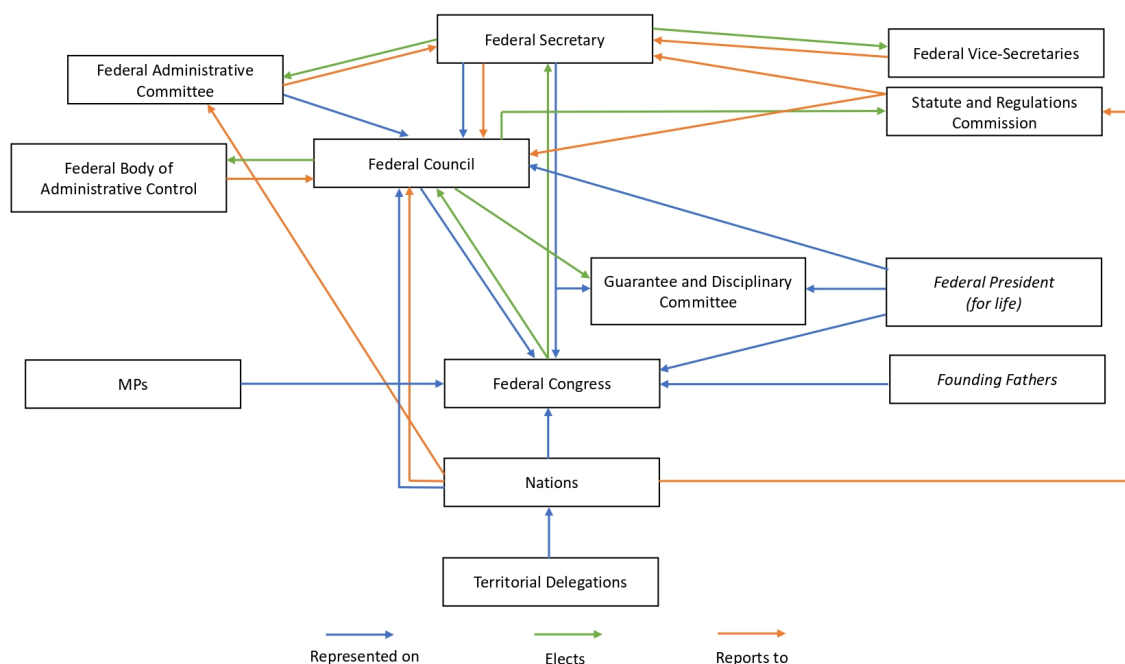
4.1 Degree of Organization

Salvini's League is characterized by a considerable "degree of organization", to use Janda's (1980) terminology, for two key reasons. First, the structures, resources and (the vast majority of) members of the old LN were poured into the new state-wide organization. Second, as the statute of Salvini's League (Lega per Salvini Premier, 2018) is very similar to the LN's statute before its transformation into a bad company (Lega Nord, 2015), it is evident that the party has attempted to export its organizational model across the whole peninsula.

A comparison between the organizational chart of the LN (Figure 3) and that of the new League (Figure 4) highlights the disempowerment of the former in favour of the latter. In fact, crucial bodies and territorial levels of the party organization that are essential for conducting political activities do exist only in the new League (indicated in bold in Figure 4). Instead, the LN was "frozen", meaning that: "There will be no secretaries, there will be no branches. It will be de-structured" (interview 4).

Differently from the LN, the new League of Matteo Salvini maintains a high degree of organization and structural articulation as well as vertical linkages (Figure 4), all of them key features of mass-parties (Panebianco, 1988). At the federal level, the key bodies of Salvini's League are the Federal Secretary, the Federal Council, the Federal Congress, and the Organizational and Territorial Federal Officer. The Federal Secretary coordinates and superintends all of the League's bodies, and is granted extensive powers that virtually shape every aspect of party life. The Federal Congress convenes every three years: it is formally granted the power to elect the Federal Secretary, and its functions include setting the political and programmatic line and approving changes to the Federal Statute. The Federal Council is chaired and summoned by the Federal Secretary, and includes, *inter alia*, the secretaries and representatives of the League's regional branches. It convenes every three months, and among its extensive prerogatives is the ability to determine the party's general course of action and to decide on a wide range of topics. A clear indication of the new League's efforts to maintain and replicate a mass-party organization across the peninsula is provided by the existence of an Organizational and Territorial Federal Officer, who is appointed by the Federal Secretary.

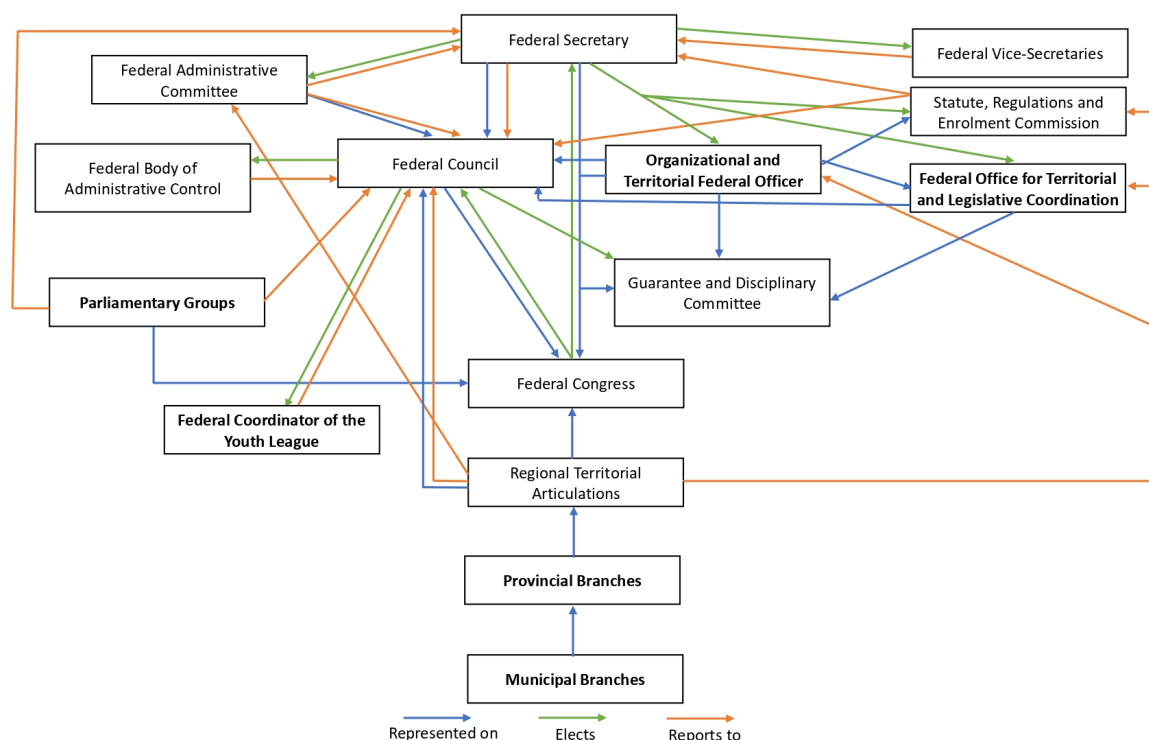
Figure 3. Organizational chart of the LN, "the bad company", own elaboration from LN (2021). Bodies in *italics* do exist in the LN but do not exist in the new League for Salvini Premier.



Salvini's League is structured into different territorial levels, federal (i.e. state-wide), regional, provincial and municipal, which are connected by a delegated structure. Each sub-national level of the organization almost perfectly mirrors the bodies of the federal party at smaller scale, thus resembling a matryoshka doll. While the old LN was structured in thirteen regional units called "nations" in the North and Centre of the peninsula, Salvini's League is constituted by twenty-two regional territorial articulations covering the entire Italian territory, which are formally bestowed with organizational, administrative, patrimonial and financial autonomy. The word "nation", which was previously used to refer to each of the individual regions and was so important in the federalist imaginary of the old LN, is never used in the Federal Statute of Salvini's League, suggesting a dramatic ideological and symbolic rupture with the past.

Salvini's League is further structured into provincial and municipal branches, called "territorial delegations". The provincial branch coordinates the activities of municipal branches, which are based upon a network of activists, and constitute the backbone of the organizational architecture of the party. Northern party representatives highlight that local branches meet on a regular basis (usually at least once a month, and on a weekly basis in some areas) and emphasize their decisive role in achieving territorial rootedness. This network is also essential for the recruitment, screening, socialization, value-infusion and control of activists.

Figure 4. Organizational chart of the League for Salvini Premier, "the good company", own elaboration from Lega per Salvini Premier (2018). Bodies indicated in **bold** do exist in the League for Salvini Premier but do not exist in the LN.



However, there are important differences between Bossi's LN and Salvini's League in terms of their relative degree of organization. First, various representatives underline that even in the North, it is no longer possible to ensure the physical existence of local branches in small towns where there are few activists, which consequently need to be aggregated in super-municipal branches (interview 22). Second, while the LN featured a plethora of ancillary organizations, this universe was already gone before the election of Salvini as party leader (interview 4). However, today's League still features the most important and energetic of its ancillary organizations of the past: the Lega Giovani (Youth League), the direct heir of the old Movimento dei Giovani Padani (MGP, Young Padanians' Movement), which is essential to carry out activities on the ground and serves as a privileged channel for the recruitment of (future) party representatives, at least in the North (interview 37).

In the light of the discussion above, there are good reasons to consider the League as the "most structured political party in Italy" (Interview 17), at least as long as the historical strongholds of the LN are concerned. However, party representatives underline that despite the party's efforts, organizational structuration and territorial rootedness in the South are still in an embryonic phase. Interviewees argue that the League has the "willingness to take root" and to "be present on the ground" (interview 37) in Calabria as well as in the broader South, where it "imported a model from the North" (ibidem). However, the League's organizational presence is so far "patchy" (interview 27) and only a few areas have a "well-structured group" (interview 40). Interestingly, differently from Northern regions where the local branches are mostly self-financed by local activists, sympathizers and representatives (e.g. interviews 11, 15, 29), the five physical branches of the League in Calabria are directly financed by the national party (interview 40), a feature

showing the commitment of the national party to develop an organizational structure in the region.

4.2 How Does the Party Try to Attract Members and Activists?

The LN experienced a dramatic collapse in its membership figures following the scandal that led to Bossi's resignation (McDonnell & Vampa, 2016), and while party officials did not provide me with updated figures on party membership, it is important to recall that the mass-party model is not defined by numbers per se. Rather, *inter alia*, it is defined by the drive to recruit new members, especially with the goal of developing an activist grassroots base to improve the party's ability to reach out to the wider electorate (see Albertazzi & van Kessel, 2021).

To understand how the League pursues this objective and what incentives it offers to prospective members and activists, it is essential to underline that, similarly to the "old" LN, Salvini's League (Lega per Salvini Premier, 2021) distinguishes between *soci sostenitori* (supporter members) and *soci ordinari militanti* (activist members). Supporter members are important because they provide some funding by paying €10 every year, while activist members constitute the organizational backbone of the party, as they are entitled to active and passive voting rights and have a duty to participate in its activities on a continuous and regular basis. For the purposes of this analysis, I adopt the re-categorization of Clark and Wilson's (1961) incentives proposed by Albertazzi (2016). According to this scholar, *purposive incentives* relate to the "importance of party programmatic goals and ideology"; *personal incentives* evoke a "sense of identity being shaped by activism", which provides a sense of "fulfilment", "satisfaction" or even "a reason to live" to members, while *communitarian incentives* refer to "the party's ability to create and foster communities of like-minded individuals"; finally, *material incentives* refer to personal gain or reward acquired by the activist (Albertazzi, 2016, pp. 121–122).

Interviews reveal that potential supporter members are reached "through gazebos, word of mouth, and social media campaigns" (Interview 24), and a key role is played by purposive incentives that do not evoke simply the core of the League's message but also its perceived embodiment in Salvini's persona, as suggested by interview 31: "[Salvini] says the things I would say, he says them as I would [...] to demonstrate my affinity I take the party card". Salvini's alleged capacity to speak on the behalf of ordinary people is perfectly consistent with the self-professed populist nature of the party, and is strikingly similar to what occurred within Bossi's LN (see Cento Bull & Gilbert, 2001, p. 21).

Purposive incentives play a crucial role in the recruitment of new *supporter members* in both the North and the South, while Northern party representatives argue that a key role in becoming an *activist member* is played by "self-motivation" (e.g. interviews 1, 14, 21, 30). Northern representatives also underline that activist members' recruitment is fostered by purposive incentives related to the desire to actively contribute to the achievement of party goals and by the provision of communitarian incentives. Significantly, communitarian incentives are also essential to maintaining activist members over time, because being a *leghista* often has negative repercussions on private life, social relationships and even personal finance. Most notably, in the North, these costs are compensated by the

development of a “microcosm, where the affections, in some cases even colleagues, friends [...] the personal world is built within the boundaries of leghismo” (Interview 9). This microcosm corresponds to a community of true “believers” (Panebianco, 1988, p. 26), a key feature of mass-parties, and helps to protect the party from careerists and infiltrators.

Finally, some representatives consider the possibility of becoming a candidate in elections a further reason to become an activist member of the League. However, given the demanding nature of activism within the party, the importance of this material incentive appears subordinate and secondary in comparison to purposive and communitarian ones, at least in the North. In the South, instead, given the newness of the party organization, activist members are still few and, most importantly, the League is often blamed for choosing candidates with little or no previous experience of activism in the party (interviews 38, 39, 40).

4.3 The Role of the Internet and Social Media in Party Organization and Activism

The League has taken advantage of the cost-effectiveness and immediacy of new technologies to perform the typical functions of mass-parties in a modern way, a necessity following the abolition of direct public funding to political parties in Italy. WhatsApp and Facebook groups are now essential to coordinate party activities and to foster activism more generally. Indeed, they are crucial to organize and advertise, in a cost-effective and immediate way, a wide range of political and non-political activities on the ground, as well as to ensure a continuous flow of communication, which results in a sort of internal party broadcasting that favours value-infusion and member encapsulation.

The League has its own website and is active on all the major social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube) and virtually all municipal branches of the party have a Facebook page. Salvini himself is very active on social media, and has personal profiles on Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, Twitter and YouTube. Salvini is not only the Italian politician with the largest number of followers on all the social media platforms, but his success is remarkable even in a comparative perspective: in early 2020 he became the first political leader in Europe to reach 4 million followers on Facebook.

However, Salvini’s popularity and the unprecedented personalization of the party message and public image under its leader should not lead to the conclusion that today’s League has abandoned the mass-party model, nor that it has become a property of its leader. Indeed, the League is far from being a “personal party” (cf. Kefford & McDonnell, 2018). Of course, Salvini has the “brand, which today is personified in the persona of the leader” (Interview 10), and interviewees commonly underline the vital importance of personalization for the electoral rise of the party (e.g. interview 19). However, personalization does not mean that the expectation of the League’s lifespan is perceived to be dependent on the political lifespan of its current leader, something that, instead, is typical of personal parties (Kefford & McDonnell, 2018). In fact, Northern representatives do acknowledge a potential scenario “after Salvini” (interview 20): “we feel leghisti, and we feel to be the party. So, whether the leader of the party is called Bianchi, Neri, Rossi, Verdi or whatever the name, one is always a leghista” (interview 19). Of course, this applies

to the North, while whether the party has a future in the South in a “post-Salvini” era is open to debate.

Having clarified why Salvini’s League should not be considered a personal party, it can be underlined that the new League is fostering a modern interpretation of the mass-party model through the systematic usage of the “TRT formula” (TV, Rete, Territorio – Television, Network, Territory) developed by Salvini’s strategist, Luca Morisi. The TRT formula informs party workings at all levels, and can be understood as a powerful way of bridging *physical* and *digital* activism; this principle is clearly inspired by marketing, in which the blend of the physical and digital worlds is commonly referred to by the term “phygital”. The TRT formula implies the continuous interaction and coordination of party activities and messages between traditional media, social media and activism on the ground (Interview 18), hence “multiply[ing] the message [...] hundreds, thousands of times” (Interview 17). This formula is taught in cadre schools, and regularly adopted by party representatives at all levels, as explained by interviewee 18:

I’m a small cog in a big machine, but tonight I’ll be on local TV, I’ll put my banner on the social networks [...] the next day I’ll broadcast the video of my interview on TV using a new media [...] in the morning I’ll be doing a gazebo, so: TV-network-territory in a continuous way.

The TRT formula delivers the image that the League and its key representatives are present “on the ground”, differently from the other parties that have long abandoned their societal roots and linkages with the “ordinary man”. Thanks to the pervasive adoption of the TRT formula, the League has pioneered a modern form of mass-party built upon phygital activism, through which it is capable of performing key functions and activities of the traditional mass-party in a more efficient and immediate way. Physical and digital activism reinforce each other, producing an amplifying effect that boosts the visibility of the party at the mass-level, delivering the image that the League, its representatives and activists are constantly on the ground.

It is important to underline that the success of the TRT formula requires the presence of local committed activists for reasons related to both logistics (e.g. the concrete organization of a gazebo) and credibility (e.g. leafleting is more effective when made by locals), because “No communication agency nor no amount of money would give you the same result” (interview 18). Also in Calabria people get closer to the League if they see representatives or activists “on the ground and social media, making an effort to solve a problem” (interview 40). However, given the uneven and spotty organizational development of the League in Calabria (interview 27), in many areas of the region (and of the South more generally), there the TRT formula is still disproportionately focused on the persona of Matteo Salvini, who aims to compensate for the lack of territorial presence with his presence. Following the principles of the TRT formula, Salvini regularly travels across the peninsula to take part in various events, and his visibility is amplified through the usage of traditional and social media. While this strategy is functional to gathering votes and public attention, with Salvini being often seen as “the only leader who comes to

visit these areas” in the South (interview 32), it is criticized by some interviewees who complain that it hinders organizational development and political activism:

[Activists] only speak about going to eat pizza, about going to rallies and saying “hooray for Salvini!”, “go Salvini!”. After which [activism] fades into agony and oblivion. (interview 38)

Salvini has come to Calabria at times, made a three-minute speech saying the same things and this was followed by an hour and a half posing for selfies. This is not politics. (interview 39)

4.4 Reasons to Grow an Active Base of Members and Activists

Coherently with its long-standing vocation as a mass-party, the League actively seeks to foster an activist grassroots base, which is essential to fulfil disparate internal and external goals, as well as to carry out practical and symbolical functions. Party representatives explain that activists organize a wide range of activities, which include, among others, leafleting, gazebos, local festivals, rallies, protest actions, convivial events, book presentations. Activism and ideology encapsulate members in what is usually perceived as a “family” or a “team”, which make the grassroots activist base a competitive weapon that can be mobilized at any time, at least in Northern regions. The presence of an activist grassroots base is considered as “what saves you politically” (interview 18), an organizational asset making the League “much more resistant when is losing support” and helping it to “grow much faster” when conditions are favourable (Interview 24). Furthermore, an activist grassroots base is also functional to providing an aura of credibility and authenticity to the League’s (self-declared) populist nature. Activists are essential to ensure that gazebos and leafleting activities are regularly carried out throughout the year, but also to deliver the idea that the party is always present on the ground to hear citizens’ concerns and grievances. This is crucial to differentiate it from the other parties, which, according to many party representatives, show up only during election campaigns.

The long and continuous effort by the League to invest in grassroots activism since the early Bossi years has produced in Northern regions what a representative (Interview 9) acutely defined as the “Leghista of proximity”. As he explains:

“In the North is easy to meet someone who is a member of the League, and [this] gives the party a human dimension, in which people can identify, not just because there is Salvini on television, but also because there is Roberto who is a tobacconist”.

Therefore, the leghista of proximity fulfils both practical and symbolical functions: he or she is not only essential to carry out key activities typical of the mass-party for free, but also to provide an aura of authenticity to the League. The goal of delivering an image of authenticity is also being pursued in Calabria: “For us it’s very important at a communicative level to make people understand that it is us who make the League [...] Salvini can give indications, but politics is made on the ground” (interview 40).

5. Centralization and Internal Democracy

Salvini's League is a hyper-centralized party following Janda's (1980, p. 108) criteria. It is characterized by very little space for internal democracy (even more so than during Bossi's era), and in line with its Leninist imprinting, the organizational imperative of the League remains democratic centralism, a feature enabling the party to deliver an image of unity and cohesiveness at the mass-level.

5.1 Centralization

Salvini's League is characterized by the disproportionate concentration of power in three federal bodies, which can be defined as the trident of power: the Federal Secretary, the Federal Council and the Organizational and Territorial Federal Officer (see above). Whereas the Federal Secretary holds a dominant position, an important concurrent role is played by the other two components of the trident of power, which, directly or indirectly, impact and steer the activities and workings of the League at both the federal and sub-national levels (see Figure 4). The overall functioning of the party machine is informed by the principle of "democratic centralism" (Interview 18), the core organizational imperative of traditional Marxist-Leninist parties. As an influential representative (Interview 30) explains:

"We discuss, then the secretary makes the synthesis [...] The Federal Council of the League is compact, united, there are no different souls [...] there is internal debate, but as soon as the meeting ends we are all compact and united".

Significantly, the League's course of action in political and programmatic terms (including party manifestos and electoral alliances, both at the national and sub-national levels), its internal rule-making, its administrative, economic and financial management as well as the management and enforcement of internal discipline are dominated, directly or indirectly, by the Federal Secretary and the Federal Council, and often register a concurrent role of the Organizational and Territorial Federal Officer. The latter is essential as "he cascades the directives down" to the other levels of the organization (Interview 15) and ensures the multi-level coordination of party activities on the ground. Power is also centralized at the federal level in terms of candidate and personnel selection. The Federal Secretary expresses an opinion on the candidatures to elective positions at the various levels, while the Federal Council determines the candidate lists for General and European elections, and ratifies the regional branches' proposed candidacies for the positions of regional governor and regional capitals' mayors, as well as their respective candidate lists.

In the historical strongholds of the party, the organizational Leninist mould still *de facto* survives, aiming at bringing within institutions representatives socialized to party values and hierarchy, trained in party cadre schools, and selected following a strict *cursus honorum*. However, even though such a *cursus honorum* is widely valued by representatives (e.g. interviews 3, 10, 11, 24), who underline the importance of "paying your dues", the new party regulation (Lega per Salvini Premier, 2021), maintains that "The Federal Council can establish, for each single electoral session of any level, the criteria of seniority of membership necessary to propose candidates or to be candidates" (art. 17).

This provision seems particularly relevant for the South, and suggests a further centralization of power in the hands of the federal party. More generally, candidate lists and alliances at the sub-national level require approval from the hierarchically superior level. It is also worth stressing that the League's communication is also hyper-centralized, through a cascade pattern from the federal level down to the municipal one, a feature that favours a coordinated implementation of the previously mentioned TRT formula.

Broadly speaking, the federal level dominates the sub-national levels through the so-called "*sistema di controllo e garanzia*" (system of control and guarantee), which makes sure that the various levels of the party organization are checked, monitored and held accountable to those that are hierarchically superior. This mechanism ensures organizational coordination and coherence. Deviations from the federal party line are regulated by means of *commissariamenti*, that is the replacement of a given monocratic or collegial body with commissioners, who are granted full powers in a given territorial area.

The instrument of *commissariamenti* played a decisive role in the disempowerment of the old LN in favour of the new League. In the North, by taking advantage of the impossibility of having sub-national congresses given the formal preclusion of dual membership in the "old" and "new" League, Salvini used the instrument of *commissariamenti* to replace various elected secretaries and collegial bodies of the "old" LN. This strategy has served a double function: on the one hand, maintaining the consolidated structure that the LN had established in its historical strongholds; on the other, ensuring that key positions within the party were held by individuals loyal to the leadership and to the party's new ideological course.

In the South, the loose approach that initially characterized NcS was supplanted by a top-down and centralized approach to party building dominated by the Northern elite and commissioners from the North. Commissioners were granted full powers in the area of their competence and given the task of exporting the key features and internal mechanisms that characterized the old LN to the South, while attempting to protect the process of party building from infiltrators and careerists. Interestingly, most of the commissioners have been Lombards, in line with the historical dominance of this regional branch in the old LN, and have been given the explicit task of exporting its organizational model and even its "mentality" (interview 40). For instance, Cristian Invernizzi, an MP from the Northern city of Bergamo, was regional commissioner in Calabria between May 2019 and January 2021: he was "Salvini's emanation in Calabria", and his task was "to organize, structure the party, even dictate the political line" (interview 25), as well as to trying "to foster the leghista mentality" in the area (interview 40). Unsurprisingly, this Northern commissioner was often criticized by the Calabrian grassroots for his top-down management of the party (interviews 38, 39).

More generally, the party in the central office seeks, in the South, "to protect the brand, in a way. If you get a criminal elected because you have not checked before [...] the main damage is suffered by the brand", to the point of being "even paranoid at times" (interview 31), but this results in the League being perceived as "detached from the real needs of the territory" (interview 38). The difficult task of also protecting the brand from individuals using the party as a "train" just to pursue a political career (interview 40), is

pursued in particular thanks to the action of commissioners who oversee candidature lists and control appointments to internal party positions (Interviews 15, 25, 27, 31, 32, 39). All in all, the League's organization looks:

“a bit military [...] We make clear that there is a hierarchy and that this hierarchy cannot be questioned in any way [but] we have some difficulties in building the structure in the South, because we try to convey [...] the concept of hierarchy [...] but there they all want to be protagonists”. (Interview 31)

Finally, it is worth underlining that exporting the organization model of the League into the South is further complicated by the electoral rise of Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi – Brothers of Italy), a populist radical right party (Zulianello 2020) led by Giorgia Meloni that has a great appeal in the area. Interviewee 38 underlines that “Brothers of Italy is the nightmare of the League”, and interviewees from the South explain that Meloni's party is attracting not simply former League voters, but also former party members (interviews 25, 37, 39, 40).

5.2 Internal Democracy

The imperative of democratic centralism leaves very little space for dissenting voices and internal democracy. Supporter members have virtually no rights at all, while activist members are closely scrutinized in terms of loyalty and dedication to the party, subject to disciplinary sanctions ranging from written reprimands to expulsion. All in all, while the duties of activist members are extensive, their prospects to have a say are poor in all the key dimensions of party life and workings.

Northern party representatives underline that local party meetings are important to ensure internal debate and the involvement of activists. However, democratic centralism leaves “the last word” to party secretaries at all territorial levels (Interview 12), and this does not commit only activists to the party line, but elected representatives as well. For instance, the League's representatives (including MPs) have a duty to regularly report their activities not only to the federal level of the party but also to the sub-national levels of the party organization, such as the municipal branch and the regional branch they belong to. Hence, as it was in Bossi's era, party members can discuss and meet at the various levels of the party organization, often with the participation of elective representatives, but their ability to influence decision-making, the political line and candidatures is close to zero.

While interviewees from the North usually mention the fact that it is possible to easily get in touch with party representatives of the League to ask for information, help or advice, and they interpret this as a form of democracy, just like participating in local party meetings, interviewees from the South tell a different story. They lament the absence of coordination between the party in public office and the party in central office, so that “you don't know where to turn because no one answers you” (interview 39), while internal debate seems poor also during local party meetings because of the extreme centralization of power in the hands of the (federal) party (*ibidem*).

All in all, the only tool that can be used by members to influence the general course of the League is the election of party leaders at various territorial levels, but this chance has also remained a dead letter in the last few years because of the widespread usage of *commissariamenti*. Although party congresses at all levels were initially frozen because of the transition from the old LN to the new League, the Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to postpone them *sine die*, raising profound concerns among many interviewees in both the North and the South.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that an important innovation in terms of internal democracy was the extension of the electorate for federal leadership elections in both 2013 and 2017 – from congress delegates to activist members with at least one-year seniority, as a derogation from the formal statutory provisions. However, rather than actually democratizing the party, primary elections resembled plebiscitarian coronations for Salvini, who obtained crushing victories against his rivals. These translated into a “surplus” legitimacy that Salvini exploited to both abandon the regionalist ideological *raison d’être* of the LN and to transform it into a politically inactive bad company.

6. Conclusions

Today’s League is characterized by a kind of “territorial dyscrasia”. In the North, Salvini’s League inherited the organizational capital of the old LN, and exploits it to carry out the traditional functions and activities of the mass-party model in a modern way. In the South, the League is better understood as a “wannabe” mass-party, as it actively tries to replicate the organizational features and practices it has consolidated in the North. However, exporting, instilling and routinizing the organizational imperatives of loyalty, activism and dedication will be a very demanding and time-consuming enterprise. Organizational development in the South remains at an embryonic stage, and the League’s strategy for nationalization has so far produced a “quasi-colonial” structure dominated by, and dependent on, the Northern elite.

This article has crucial implications for our understanding of the mass-party organizational model in the contemporary world. While Bossi’s LN was a mass-party in a traditional sense, the case of Salvini’s League suggests that new technologies can be successfully exploited to develop a modern form of mass-party. As previously mentioned, a key feature of mass-parties is the development of an activist grassroots base to improve the party’s ability to reach out to the wider electorate (Albertazzi & van Kessel, 2021).

In this respect, this article has suggested that Salvini’s League is characterized by the desire to act and be perceived as a mass-party; however, it has pioneered an innovative interpretation of the latter organizational model. Indeed, the League can be understood as a modern mass-party whose key feature is ceaseless phygital activism, which is a blend of digital and physical activism that is far from being limited to election times. Phygital activism is sought on a continuous basis, and aims at boosting the visibility of the party at the mass-level, thanks to a synergy between traditional in-person and face-to-face activism, performed by a grassroots base, and modern online activism, carried out through social media and instant messaging systems.

A modern mass-party grounded on phygital activism aims to deliver the image that the party is constantly on the ground to collect citizens' concerns, and the continuous interaction between physical and digital activism also fosters the development of a political community that encapsulates members through ideology. Most notably, these are key functions performed by mass-parties: the case of the League suggests that phygital activism enables the reinterpretation of a traditional organizational model in a modern, more efficient, immediate and less bureaucratic way, making it an asset capable of meeting the challenges of the twenty-first century.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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ONLINE APPENDIX

A total of 41 interviews were conducted between November 2019 and June 2021. Fieldwork initially consisted in face-to-face interviews, but the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic forced me to conduct interviews either via phone or online, according to the choice of the individual party representative. The choice of carrying out remote interviews was taken for safety reasons after the first local lockdowns in Lombardy and Veneto were enforced on 23 February 2020. Interviews were conducted in Italian and typically lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours. They were digitally recorded with the consent of the interviewee, and the data were collected, stored, and de-identified in line with the ethical procedures of the institution to which I belonged.

LIST OF INTERVIEWS

(numbered in chronological order)

Emilia-Romagna

- Interview 1 - Member of a Municipal Council. Face-to-face interview, 19 November 2019.
- Interview 3 - Member of the Regional Council. Face-to-face interview, 18 December 2019.
- Interview 4 - Secretary of a Municipal branch. Face-to-face interview, 18 December 2019.
- Interview 5 - Provincial Coordinator of the Youth League. Face-to-face interview, 20 December 2019.
- Interview 7 - Member of a Municipal Council. Face-to-face interview, 13 February 2020.
- Interview 12 - Secretary of a Municipal branch. Remote interview, 17 June 2020.
- Interview 14 - Member of a Municipal Council. Remote interview, 19 June 2020.
- Interview 15 - Member of the Regional Council. Remote interview, 19 June 2020.
- Interview 16 - Member of the Chamber of Deputies, Remote interview, 23 June 2020.
- Interview 30 - Secretary of the party Romagna regional branch and member of the Chamber of Deputies. Remote interview, 6 July 2020.
- Interview 34 - Municipal Organizational Officer. Remote interview, 10 July 2020.

Lombardy

- Interview 2 - Municipal Coordinator of the Youth League. Face-to-face interview, 4 December 2019.
- Interview 9 - Member of a Municipal Council. Remote interview, 6 June 2020.
- Interview 10 - Member of the Chamber of Deputies. Remote interview, 10 June 2020.
- Interview 11 - Member of the Regional Council. Remote interview, 17 June 2020.
- Interview 13 - Minority Representative within the Federal Council of the Northern League. Remote interview, 18 June 2020.
- Interview 17 - Member of the Chamber of Deputies. Remote interview, 24 June 2020.
- Interview 22 - Commissioner of a Municipal Branch. Remote interview, 1 July 2020.
- Interview 23 - Municipal Coordinator of the Youth League. Remote interview, 1 July 2020.
- Interview 26 - Member of the Regional Council. Remote interview, 3 July 2020.
- Interview 28 - Provincial Coordinator of Women's League. Remote interview, 6 July 2020.

Interview 31 - Member of the Federal Council. Remote interview, 7 July 2020.

Interview 33 - Mayor. Remote interview, 8 July 2020.

Veneto

Interview 6 - Member of the Regional Council. Face-to-face, 23 December 2019.

Interview 8 - Member of a Municipal Council. Remote interview, 25 February 2020.

Interview 18 - Member of the Chamber of Deputies. Remote interview, 26 June 2020.

Interview 19 - Member of the Regional Council. Remote interview, 29 June 2020.

Interview 20 - Secretary of a Municipal Branch. Remote interview, 30 June 2020.

Interview 21 - Secretary of a Municipal Branch. Remote interview, 1 July 2020.

Interview 24 - Member of the Chamber of Deputies. Remote interview, 2 July 2020.

Interview 29 - Secretary of a Municipal Branch. Remote interview, 6 July 2020.

Interview 35 - Member of the Regional Council. Remote interview, 13 July 2020.

Interview 36 - Member of the Chamber of Deputies and Regional Organizational Officer.
Remote interview, 13 July 2020.

Interview 37 - Regional Organizational Officer of the Youth League. Remote interview, 13 July 2020.

Calabria

Interview 25 - Former representative of the Youth League. Remote interview, 2 July 2020.

Interview 27 - Representative the Youth League. Remote interview, 3 July 2020.

Interview 32 - Representative the Youth League. Remote interview, 7 July 2020.

Interview 38 - Former Candidate for the European Parliament, Southern Italy Constituency.
Remote interview, 15 May 2021.

Interview 39 - Former Representative of the Northern League. Remote interview, 17 May 2021.

Interview 40 - Coordinator of a Municipal branch. Remote interview, 31 May 2021.

Interview 41 - Member of a Municipal Directive Council. Remote interview, 1 June 2021.