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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Tarchi, M. (2013). What's Left of the Italian Right? *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review*, 13(4), 693-709.
<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-447770>

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What's Left of the Italian Right?

MARCO TARCHI

Another Anomaly of Italian Politics

Defining which parties may be gathered under the label of the Right within the Italian political system has never been, since 1945, an easy task. As the best known of the historians of Italian fascism, Renzo De Felice, wrote thirty years after the fall of Mussolini's regime,

"In Italy, the political struggle is so singular that a right wing of a classic traditional type, that is, a respectable, law-and-order (*perbenistica*) right, is unthinkable because it would be soon accused to be a fascist one"¹.

As a matter of fact, because of the widespread association of every form of avowed strong conservatism and/or nationalism to the fascist ideology, along the whole course of the so-called First Republic (1946-1993) all the moderate parties – including the *Partito Liberale Italiano* (PLI), the main heir of the pre-fascist "historical Right" – carefully avoided to use and accept that label. Even the notion of Centre-Right, today so popular in the Italian political language, was banned. For a long period, the absence of a legitimate right-wing political force on the political setting was one of the components of the "Italian anomaly" discussed by many political scientists. And the only party that tried (not without internal disagreements) to occupy this portion of the electoral political space was, after the meteoric irruption of the proto-populist *Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque*², the neo-fascist *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI). It is a fact that this party, described by Giovanni Sartori as one of the two "anti-system" wings of the Italian "polarized pluralism"³ and generally considered as the most prominent member of the Extreme Right European family, until 1993 was the only political force that was ready to describe itself as the representative of the Italian Right, and if one wants to ascertain what is left of the Right in Italy today, first of all he has to analyze the "long march through the institutions"⁴ that the MSI has performed all along its life, extender over nearly half a century (December 1946-January 1995).

Taking part in democratic politics in the Italian post-war period was a hard task for those who looked upon the fascist past as a symbol of honor and openly denounced the armed Resistance to the Mussolini's *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* fostered by the rebel fighting bands during the 1943-1945 civil war as the Trojan Horse of the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI), strictly associated with Soviet communism. None of

¹ Renzo DE FELICE, *Intervista sul fascismo*, Laterza, Bari, 1975, p. 97.

² On this flash-party, see Sandro SETTA, *L'Uomo qualunque 1944-1948*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2005, and Marco TARCHI, *L'Italia populista. Dal qualunquismo ai girotondi*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2003, pp. 75-93.

³ See Giovanni SARTORI, *Teoria dei partiti e caso italiano*, SugarCo, Milano, 1982, pp. 7-44.

⁴ See Piero IGNAZI, *Il polo escluso*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1987.

the five party leaders¹ succeeded in resolving this contradiction prior to the beginning of the 1990s. This does not mean that during the course of its history, which was finished in January 1995 with the 17th congress decreeing the party transformation into another political actor, *Alleanza Nazionale*, the MSI did not achieve tangible results. Despite of the official anti-fascist consensus which had laid the basis of the republican establishment, in the Cold War era the MSI, because of its strong anti-communist stances, was seen by some conservative circles and sectors of the public opinion as a potential ally of the *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC), but its attempts to achieve a coalition potential always failed. The party played in some occasions a substantial role, providing support for the election of two presidents of the republic (Antonio Segni and Giovanni Leone) and capturing a not negligible share of the protest vote, that made of it the fourth largest party in Parliament. Nevertheless, the lack of democratic legitimacy inscribed into its fascist chromosomes served to severely limit its political ambitions.

In addition, the nature of the MSI as an anti-system party (more so in its culture and programs rather than its methods) was essential in creating the "triangle of illegitimacy"² that made the political Centre, i.e. the DC, the linchpin of Italian politics. In that context the MSI was assigned a subordinate role, being occasionally co-opted when it served the DC's purposes, and it was excluded from government due to the Christian Democrats' need to appear as the main political bulwark against the Left. However, in spite of the modest leverage it had in the system, the party contributed to undermine the credibility of any possible alternation in government between the Left and the Right and it favored the existence of a blocked system of party competition based on a conditional co-optation of the "extremes" – in general, the PCI – in decision-making processes. The objective of this centrist strategy was to create a form of consociationalism that used anti-fascism as its cornerstone.

Given this situation and the nostalgic bent of the MSI after its unsuccessful attempts to insert itself into the dynamics of coalition building, it may seem odd that the party never renounced the prospect of making a comeback. In the 1990 regional elections, the share of its vote dropped to 3.9 per cent, its worst electoral result since 1948. However, due to its consistent exclusion from power at national and local level and its general image of being a different party from the others, only three years later the MSI underwent a rapid change in its fortunes. Its forced abstinence from power, which had limited its resources and prevented it from establishing solid relations of exchange with economic and social interest groups, was transformed into fortunate coincidence when the cyclone of moral indignation hit the ruling class of the First Republic in connection with the "Clean Hands" investigation. The weight of anti-fascist discrimination, already eroded by the passage of time, was further reduced because many leaders who had paid lip service to this principle were implicated in the

¹ The charismatic feature that the fascist mentality ascribes to the leadership generally allowed the MSI national secretaries to exert power for long periods: Giorgio Almirante led the party for over twenty years (1946-1950 and 1969-1987), Arturo Michelini for fifteen (from 1954 to his death in 1969), Gianfranco Fini for six (1987-1989 and 1991-1995), before becoming the president of the *Alleanza Nazionale*, from its birth to its extinction (1995-2008). The only exceptions were the secretaries of Augusto De Marsanich (1950-1954) and Pino Rauti (1990-1991).

² See Roberto CHIARINI, "La Destra italiana. Il paradosso di un'identità illegittima", *Italia contemporanea*, no. 185, 1991, pp. 582-600.

corruption scandals. In addition, the growth of the anti-politician¹ backlash brought on by *Tangentopoli* favored the re-admission into the national political arena of those political "exiles in their own country"² who in December 1946 had gathered around the symbol of the tricolored flame to keep alive the memory of fascism.

In the course of only two years (1993-1994) the dynamics of the Italian party system drastically changed, owing to the combined effect of two leading factors: the loss of legitimacy of the ruling political élite, involved in a large network of corruption and prosecuted by the judges, and the introduction of a new electoral law based mainly on the plurality principle. The disintegration of the DC and of the other centre parties made it possible for the neo-fascist party to come out of the ghetto where it had been confined and to be accepted by Silvio Berlusconi as an important partner for his new Centre-Right electoral cartel.

Alleanza Nazionale: *from the "Custom clearance" to the Government*

The base for this unexpected outcome was the coming together of new rules for the election of city mayors (for the first time they would have been directly chosen by the voters) and the first effects of the *Tangentopoli* investigations. The collapse of their organizations under the pressure of the judiciary forced the centre parties to propose local candidates with little stature or without political and/or administrative experience. The moral disqualification and the organizational weakness of the previous governing parties encouraged a number of moderate and conservative voters to shift their support to two "anti-establishment" challengers: the *Lega Nord* in the northern regions and the MSI in the centre-southern ones. The logic of the two-ballot system increased the size of the phenomenon to the point of electing MSI mayors in 33 towns with more than 15.000 inhabitants, four of which were provincial capitals: Benevento, Caltanissetta, Chieti and Latina. It is evident that, presented with the alternative of voting either for a candidate from the Left or one from the "extreme" Right, many ex-supporters of the DC and other centrist parties preferred to vote for the latter.

On 21 November 1993, in Rome and Naples, where the MSI lists had gained more than 30 per cent of the vote during the first round, its candidates for mayor – the national secretary Gianfranco Fini, and the grand-daughter of the *duce*, Alessandra Mussolini – were admitted to the second ballot. Even if they were not successful, the amount of the vote they received (respectively 46.9 and 44.4 per cent) was a shock both for the political élite and for the media. The simultaneous collapse of the mainstream parties made it clear that the MSI, perceived as being outside the so-called "constitutional arch", emerged as front-runner against the Left dominated by former Communists. Silvio Berlusconi, who was preparing his entry into the political competition, was the first to subscribe this view by endorsing Fini's candidature as

¹ We prefer to refer to anti-politician rather than anti-party sentiments because the latter were extensively diffused among the public even prior to the explosion of the *Mani Pulite* scandal, which brought these sentiments to bear against other institutions, such as the civil service. On this topic, see Leonardo MORLINO, Marco TARCHI, "The Dissatisfied Society: The Roots of Political Change in Italy", *European Journal of Political Research*, no. 30, 1996, pp. 41-63.

² See Marco TARCHI, *Esuli in patria. I fascisti nell'Italia repubblicana*, Guanda, Milano, 1995.

mayor of Rome between the ballots. The media described that choice as a crucial "custom clearance" (*sdoganamento*) of the party.

At that point, a significant number of the pre-conditions for the passage of the MSI from its traditional role as a right-wing protest party to a more constructive role had been established. In the first place, the electoral space available to the party had increased. The diffusion of a majoritarian political perspective, sustained by public opinion and the media, set the stage for the need to choose between Left and Right and the MSI was in position to occupy one of these political positions by itself. Secondly, some of the impediments which had for a long time restricted the party's ability to attract voters disappeared. On the one hand, the fall of the Soviet Union reduced the fear of communism of many conservative voters and enticed them to abandon their atavistic support of the DC. On the other hand, the explosion of the corruption scandal reduced the DC's capacity to engage in patronage, thereby releasing a large part of its supporters into the electoral marketplace. Millions of voters were once again potentially available. Finally, the gap of democratic legitimacy was overcome. In fact, the search for new and credible parties to rule the country turned the MSI's previous shortcomings into positive characteristics. Given that the party had been kept at the margins of the political system, it was not contaminated by corruption and public patronage in the eyes of the public. Its lack of organizational and programmatic renewal was now presented by the party leadership as a refuse to become involved in jockeying for personal advantages which has been associated with the former governing parties, especially the *Partito Socialista Italiano* (PSI). Its nationalist and authoritarian proclivity was interpreted as a guarantee of responsibility and respect for the national interest.

The success of the party at the 1993 municipal elections pushed the MSI leadership to moderate its approach by enforcing the process of integration into the democratic system long initiated but never completed. The attempt to create a wider political movement in order to acquire those voters which were ideologically oriented toward the Right, but which had remained within the DC due to the Cold War logic, had remained a constant in MSI strategy. What was different this time were the surrounding political conditions. The temptation of highly-principled isolation had already brought harm to the *Lega Nord*, whose candidates had been defeated by the opposing electoral bloc in almost all the cities of the North (with the sole exception of Milan) in 1993. The defeats (even if narrow) of Fini and Mussolini in the mayoral elections represented another alarm bell. It was on this basis that the proposal made months before by the political scientist Domenico Fisichella¹, who had proposed the regeneration of the Right through a renewal of its image and political program to counterbalance the formation of a "Democratic Alliance" by the Centre-Left parties, gathered momentum. In order to become reality, the proposal needed to find valid interlocutors who could make the reorganization of the right-wing of the political spectrum credible. For a party which in the past had emphasized the importance of identity and belonging, such a change was not easy, and when the idea was launched, very few independent personalities decided to join. The inaugural meeting of *Alleanza Nazionale*, the 22 January 1994, did not witness the birth of a new political formation, or the embryo of a federation, but only a new label under which the diffused territorial organization of the MSI could operate.

¹ See Adalberto BALDONI, *Storia della destra. Dal postfascismo al popolo della libertà*, Vallecchi, Firenze, 2009, pp. 287-289.

For the party leadership, the change of name and symbol was basically a tactical and instrumental move, intended to set up a "Great Right" as Arturo Michelini, the most moderate leader of the party, had tried to do in vain in the sixties by addressing to royalists and liberals¹. So, at the beginning the new label was simply added to the traditional name, to form the MSI-*Alleanza Nazionale*, but even in this limited way, the change was not well accepted by all the middle-level élite and partisans, always involved in sharp confrontation between different factions². The change had been neither preceded nor prepared by a critical discussion of the neo-fascist experience, and AN leaders frequently paid public homage to the "glorious" struggle of their forefathers. They exhibited a full allegiance to democracy, but the echoes of the neo-fascist rhetoric were frequent in the party press. The leadership had to try and resolve a complicated dilemma: how to maintain the adherence of both party militants and the staff of the MSI, essential for the proper function of the organizational machinery which now appeared under the new banner, while at the same time renouncing a constituent part of the symbolic ideological resources that had previously motivated the members to work for the party. But without such a change, to maintain the consensus of that part of the electorate that had chosen for the first time the MSI candidates at the 1993 local elections on the wave of the "First Republic" collapse, would have been rather impossible.

What allowed *Alleanza Nazionale* to overcome the probable impasse was the unexpected appearance of *Forza Italia*. The entry of Silvio Berlusconi as an aspiring Prime Minister and head of a new party served to increase the crisis of the Italian political system and to attract the polemical attacks of the Left. Covered by the presence of Berlusconi, Fini was allowed to concentrate on presenting a calm and balanced image which induced some of the leaders of the progressive coalition to recognize his democratic credentials in a manner as would have been unthinkable before. The change in attitude of the most important party of the Left, the *Partito Democratico della Sinistra* (PDS), reinforced the appearance of a transformation that, in reality, still had to take place. Despite the fact that for the moment it was only an electoral cartel born "by gemmation" from the trunk of the MSI³, the media referred to *Alleanza Nazionale* as if this new party already existed. In news broadcasts and newspapers reports, Fini became "the coordinator of the National Alliance".

The agreement with *Forza Italia*, the *Unione di Centro* and the *Centro Cristiano Democratico* (CCD) to present common candidates in a large part of the constituencies of the central and southern regions under the banner of the *Polo del Buongoverno* (Good Government Pole) at the March 1994 general elections, represented another step toward full legitimization for the MSI-AN that would be fully rewarded by the electoral results. With 5.202.398 votes for the Chamber of Deputies (13.5%), the party achieved an historical triumph. But the range of its importance within the winning alliance cannot be measured only by this statistic. What was also important was the

¹ See Piero IGNAZI, *Postfascisti?*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1994; Piero IGNAZI, "La resurrezione postfascista", *Il Mulino*, vol. XLIII, no. 6, 1994, pp. 853-862.

² On the internal struggles of the MSI, see Marco TARCHI, *Cinquant'anni di nostalgia. La destra italiana dopo il fascismo*, Rizzoli, Milano, 1995; Marco TARCHI, *Dal Msi ad An. Organizzazione e strategie*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1997.

³ The suggestive and appropriate image has been proposed by Ilvo DIAMANTI, "Partiti modelli", *Almanacco 1995 di Politica ed Economia*, Special Issue, 1995, pp. 71-79.

attractive power of its candidates¹, the encouraging results achieved in many electoral districts of the North in competition with the Pole of Liberty lists (from which it was excluded due to the opposition from the *Lega Nord*) and the defeats sustained by the moderate alliance in areas such as Abruzzo and Campania, where *Alleanza Nazionale* was not allowed to join the list due to internal conflicts. With 109 deputies and 48 senators, the MSI-AN made its first foray into government, and obtained five ministers and twelve under-secretaries in the cabinet.

The Right and the Centre-Right: Allies and Competitors

Despite the fact that the electoral success was organized exclusively by the old leadership and that the number of independents elected on the party lists in 1994 was less than the percentage elected in 1992², the new situation emphasized once again the need to transform the party. Entering a government whose program differed significantly from MSI's political culture – this party had always criticized liberal society and consumerism – the MSI-AN felt the need to differentiate itself in order to maintain its own identity. It tried to do it by projecting itself as the “social conscience” of the coalition, but this was possible only because it had at its disposal a party organization that derived its inspiration from neo-fascist roots and ideals. Moving the emphasis toward new members who had been attracted to the party by the electoral victory did not resolve the contradiction, though the fact that the new members were driven more by “careerist” than by “idealistic” motivations³ certainly provided the basis for a gradual de-ideologization of politics within an organization that had conserved a strong emotional and “sacred” conception of its identity.

Forced to look for cooperation, the party, unused to this practice, had early difficulties in the relations with new allies. During its eight months in government, the problem of the party's dual nature re-emerged in various forms. The leadership clearly wanted to reassure that conspicuous part of its electorate were oriented toward the Centre and that the party no longer looked back to fascism for its inspiration. At other times though, the party reverted to positions which were more in line with its old political orientations. This incoherent behaviour contributed to the irresolution of the governmental action. With the passing of time, it was clear that the MSI-AN and the *Lega Nord* disliked one another, and disagreed on many proposed policies. So, the heterogeneous coalition formed by Berlusconi just before the elections in order to

¹ Stefano BARTOLINI, Roberto D'ALIMONTE, “La competizione maggioritaria: le origini elettorali del parlamento diviso”, *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, vol. XXIV, no. 3, 1994, pp. 631-686, show that in single-members districts the MSI-AN candidates running under the banner of the Good Government Pole attracted more votes than did the separate party lists MSI-AN had joined for the proportional vote: the average was 37.8 to 34.5 per cent.

² See Luca VERZICHELLI, “Gli eletti”, *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, vol. XXIV, no. 3, 1994, pp. 715-739.

³ The distinction between *carrieristi* (careerists) and *credenti* (true believers) within the party organization has been proposed by Angelo PANEBIANCO, *Modelli di partito*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1982; English translation: *Political Parties*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York, 1988.

prevent the success of the Left proved unable to overcome its internal contradictions and the first Berlusconi cabinet collapsed after only seven months.

Once again in the opposition, the MSI-AN was forced to take another step forward in order not to lose the conspicuous resources recently gained. The reinforcement of the relationship with *Forza Italia*, encouraged by the need to reconstruct a central axis of the Centre-Right coalition after the exit of the *Lega Nord*, was an integral part of the party's strategy of presenting itself as a responsible political force firmly anchored on the Right, but not at all subversive of the democratic system. The question, raised especially abroad, over the so-called "rebirth of fascism" represented by the access of "post-fascists" to power, pushed Fini to actively try to transform the party's image by dropping its original ideology. In preparing this turn, the MSI-AN secretary made use of his increased credibility and the highly centralized structure of the party organization. Fini presented the theses of the upcoming "foundational" congress – the so-called Fiuggi Theses – without a preliminary internal debate and used them as a test of the party's unquestioned support of the leader. The purpose of the theses was to represent a radical break with the past and therefore to attract the attention of the media and to stimulate debate both among the public opinion and the political class. The echo raised by this Manifesto was actually large, but the judgments of the informed commentators were divided and many party cadres expressed their perplexity when faced some radical departures like the inclusion of Benedetto Croce and Antonio Gramsci as part of the cultural heritage assumed by AN or the statement that the Right to which the new party declared to belong was not "a by-product of Fascism". However, the process of evolution went on and the Congress held in Fiuggi on 25-29 January 1995 sanctioned the end of MSI and transformed it into an autonomous political subject, *Alleanza Nazionale*. Having put out the traditional "tricolor flame", Fini placed a reduced version of it in the new symbol.

In fact, at that moment the change was more cosmetic than real, because there was an identifiable continuity with the MSI, but it nevertheless represented a new phenomenon in the history of the Right. For the first time since 1945, the Right enjoyed a central role in the Italian political system. Having overturned the status as a pariah party and following their leader's decision, almost all members accepted the change necessary to pursue their ideals. Only one of the historical leaders, Pino Rauti, former secretary of the party in 1990-91, opposed this decision and founded the *Movimento Sociale-Fiamma tricolore* in strong continuity with the MSI. But in doing so he helped Fini by drawing a clear line between supporters of the new project and diehard fascists.

The limits of the transformation were evident. The "new" party did not have a statute. The congress only approved the first four articles, which gave all powers to the president, a position to which Fini was elected by acclamation. An overwhelming majority of delegates came from the MSI, and the national leadership of AN nominated by the president himself included almost all the members of the old MSI "inner circle". However, Fini tried to emphasize the originality of this innovation. In his view, the final motion approved by the Fiuggi Congress represented an important step to break with the past, by claiming to "embrace the democratic values that fascism had denied"¹, but it was not enough to achieve AN's political legitimization at large. Party

¹ Tesi politiche per il XVII Congresso Nazionale del MSI-DN, "Pensiamo l'Italia, il domani c'è già. Valori, idee e progetti per l'Alleanza Nazionale", supplement to the MSI newspaper *Secolo d'Italia*, 7.12.1994, p. 8.

position was considered contradictory. Some observers suggested that it was simply a mimetic version of classic neo-fascism¹. Others detected signs of transformation, though not sufficient to abandon the fascist brand to define the ideological hybrid that Fini and his party were elaborating², and emphasized the illiberal imprinting of many ideological references of the text, aimed solely to "create the illusion of a core change in ideology and programs"³. According to the data from a survey conducted among the party delegates at the Programmatic Conference held three years after the foundational congress⁴, they still displayed contradictory political attitudes towards that past which had inspired the creation of the MSI.

Besides the problem of (re-)defining its identity after the return to opposition, AN was confronted to crucial external challenges. Overshadowed by the personality of Berlusconi, its leadership gave new priority to concerns about differentiating the party from its allies. Assuming that *Forza Italia* could quickly fall apart, Fini and the members of his team progressively moved to more moderate positions, showing off that the policy of the Italian Right was oriented toward the Centre, although an inner faction, *Destra sociale* (social Right), led by two influential cadres of the party machine, Gianni Alemanno and Francesco Storace⁵, kept the traditional political culture of MSI alive. In 1996, after the crisis of the technical cabinet led by Lamberto Dini, against its allies' attempts of mediation, AN called for early election, thus obtaining the best result in its history (15.7%), but due to its competition with the MS-FT (not admitted in Berlusconi's coalition because of a veto put by Fini)⁶, the Centre-Right was defeated.

From that moment onwards, *Alleanza Nazionale* competed strongly against *Forza Italia*, trying to establish an hegemony on the moderate electorate. Riffles arose mainly over the reform of the judiciary and the choice of a new model of government, with AN showing its favor for a Presidential Republic while FI preferred a strengthening of the powers of Prime Minister. Some other points of dissent arose when the general frame

¹ See, for instance, Peter H. MERKL, "Introduction", in Peter H. MERKL, Leonard WEINBERG (eds.), *The Revival of Right-Wing Extremism in the Nineties*, Frank Cass, London-Portland 1997, pp. 1-15; Stephen SCHEINBERG, "Conclusion", in Aurel BRAUN, Stephen SCHEINBERG (eds.), *The Extreme Right. Freedom and Security at Risk*, Westview Press, Boulder, 2001, pp. 250-257.

² See Roger GRIFFIN, "The 'Post-fascism' of the *Alleanza nazionale*: A Case Study in Ideological Morphology", *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. I, no. 2, 1996, pp. 123-145.

³ Piero IGNAZI, "La resurrezione postfascista", cit., p. 856; see also Gianfranco BALDINI, Rinaldo VIGNATI, "Dal Msi ad An: una nuova cultura politica?", *Polis*, vol. X, no. 1, 1996, pp. 81-101.

⁴ See Simone BERTOLINO, Flavio CHIAPPONI, "I militanti di *Alleanza Nazionale*: ancora 'Esuli in Patria'?", *Quaderni di Scienza Politica*, vol. VIII, no. 2, 1999, pp. 211-249.

⁵ Gianni Alemanno, for a long period very close to Pino Rauti, had been national secretary of the MSI youth organization *Fronte della Gioventù* from 1988 to 1991. Later he was deputy (1994-2013), Minister of Agriculture (2001-2006) and mayor of Rome (2008-2013); Francesco Storace, after a period as Gianfranco Fini's spokesman, was deputy (1994-2000), President of Lazio Region (2000-2005), Minister of Health (2005-2006) and senator (2006-2008).

⁶ The MS-FT gained 629.522 votes (1,7%) for the Chamber of Deputies and 748.759 (2,3%) for the Senate, even if it was not able to present candidates in some districts. This result was enough to cause the defeat of the Centre-Right coalition in many districts (36 for the Chamber of Deputies, 26 for the Senate). See Roberto D'ALIMONTE, Stefano BARTOLINI, "Come perdere una maggioranza. La competizione nei collegi uninominali", *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, vol. XXVI, no. 3, 1996, pp. 655-701.

of a Constitutional reform was discussed by a special parliamentary commission. The new party ideology, highlighted in the lengthy document presented at the 1998 Programmatic Conference¹, stated liberalism in economy and conservative positions on ethical issues, a strategy aimed at attracting moderates. If between 1995 and 1997 the party had sought to become a radical force of renewal of the Italian political system, determined to undertake a complete replacement of the political class and a reform of institutions inspired by a model of direct democracy, now it presented itself as an advocate of modernization. During the first phase of its life, the political culture of AN had assumed features of populism, of a "party of civil society", an alternative to the establishment that would nevertheless correct society's distortions within the existing framework. Between 1998 and 2000, it showed a conversion to the free market and the primacy of individual initiative, but at the same time declared to aim to protect national identity against the secessionist tendencies fostered by the Northern League and of traditional morals against corruption. This was the phase of a "national-liberal" project aiming to regain some of the electoral ground won by *Forza Italia*.

Moving to the Centre, however, AN run the risk of leaving room on its Right to its competitors; and that space was attractive not only for the Extreme Right but also for the *Lega Nord* and *Forza Italia*. While in its search for legitimacy *Alleanza Nazionale* after the fall of the first Berlusconi cabinet had carefully avoided to adopt open populist stances, its competitors were aware of the large electoral potential of populism and adopted its style and discourse². The attitude toward the Left was another matter of dissent. According to Fini, the era of anti-communism and ideological conflicts that had plagued the nineteenth century was over, whereas Berlusconi stressed his strong aversion to communism gaining the favour of the AN militants, who gradually were renouncing the original matrix³. At the same time, *Alleanza Nazionale* established a cooperation with Mario Segni, a former Christian Democrat who had launched some years before a movement to reform the political system through the use of instruments of direct democracy, and some members of the Radical Party to promote a referendum on the electoral law which culminated in the formation of a joint-list at the 1999 European Parliament election. The poor outcome of both initiatives (non-quorum referendum and only 10.3% in the elections) confirmed the failure of this strategy of emphasized differentiation from *Forza Italia* and reinforced confrontational stances within the party.

The Return to the Government

The crisis of the centre-left governments since 1998 re-launched the necessity of unifying the opposition. Despite the harsh confrontation in previous years, *Alleanza Nazionale* did not refuse an alliance with the *Lega Nord* and it registered the Centre-Right coalition's success in April 2000 regional elections (which determined the

¹ "Rimetti in cammino la speranza dell'Italia". Documento della prima Conferenza Programmatica di Alleanza Nazionale, Verona, 27 febbraio-1 marzo 1998.

² See Marco TARCHI, *L'Italia populista...cit.*

³ See Roberto CHIARINI, Marco MARAFFI, (eds.), *La destra allo specchio. La cultura politica di Alleanza nazionale*, Marsili, Venezia, 2001.

collapse of the D'Alema cabinet, the first led by a former communist), showing that the AN's hopes of drawing voters away from *Forza Italia* were waned: Berlusconi's party obtained 25.6% versus AN's 13.1%. However, the Alliance acquired a higher number of regional councilors and assessors, and gained the Presidency of two regions, Lazio and Abruzzo. The increase in the number of party representatives in local government and the progressive professionalization of the party's intermediate staff favored the definitive transition from a party of true "believers", as the MSI had always been, to a party of more pragmatic "careerists". Notwithstanding the dramatic increase in the number of members officially declared by the party until to 467.539 in 1995, the party was characterized by an emphasis on its presence "in public office" rather than "on the ground"¹, through a large number of promotions to positions of power in the public sector. It was even more clear that the positions expressed in the programmatic documents presented at the AN Naples conference of February 2001 with the leitmotif of the "Destra di governo"² aimed to shift towards moderate tendencies³.

The 2001 elections confirmed the regressive trend of AN, which obtained only 12%, confronted to FI's 29.4%, but allowed the party to acquire ministerial positions in the Berlusconi's second cabinet and the nomination of its leader as deputy Prime Minister. As to avoid the loss of its traditional electorate, since 2000 the party has recovered some of the ideas of the MSI, albeit renewed and adapted to the new national and international context: the cult of law and order, the guiding role of the state in the economy, and the exaltation of social bonds in the national community. These ideas were not presented in the form of protest, but as a program consonant with a party called to the responsibilities of government. The conviction that in the Italian society was growing up a "desire for the Right" based on the need for both identity and security, explains the search for a synthetic ideological formula, modernizing in some ways, conservative in others. In the meanwhile, Fini was trying to affirm himself as a serious and responsible conservative politician, now distancing himself from his old dream of reviving a "Fascism of 2000"⁴ and in some cases bypassing every kind of internal debate (the National Assembly met very rarely) to impose to the party new turns⁵. Fini was appointed as the official representative of the Italian government in the European Convention, endorsed the military attack against Iraq and, while taking a hard line on law and order (he call for the repression of the anti-G8 protesters in Genoa, and for the use of "very severe" punishments for drug-dealers), assumed more "progressive" positions on other themes. More specifically, at the end of 2003 the party leader launched the proposal to provide legal immigrants with the right to vote at local elections, revised previous positions on ethical issues

¹ On this distinction see Robert S. KATZ, Peter MAIR, "Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party", *Party Politics*, vol. V, no. 1, 1995, pp. 5-28.

² "Libero, forte, giusto. Il governo che vogliamo", Patto di programma discusso nella Seconda Conferenza Programmatica di *Alleanza Nazionale*, Napoli, 23-25 febbraio 2001.

³ See Marco TARCHI, "The political Culture of the *Alleanza nazionale*: An Analysis of the Party's Programmatic Documents (1995-2002)", *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, vol. VIII, no. 2, 2003, pp. 135-181.

⁴ See Luca NEGRI, *Doppifini: l'uomo che ha detto tutto e il contrario di tutto*, Vallecchi, Firenze 2010.

⁵ See Carlo RUZZA, Stefano FELLA, *Re-inventing the Italian Right. Territorial Politics, Populism and "Post-fascism"*, Routledge, London and New York, 2009, pp. 153-158.

opening to some libertarian options, retreated his statement on Mussolini, defined in 1994 as "the greatest Italian statesman of the twentieth century" and, during an official visit to Jerusalem, he defined fascism as an "absolute evil" because of its racial laws. Fini's image as leader of a modern and moderate right-wing force was even more highlighted after his appointment as Minister of Foreign Affairs in November 2004. However, the fact that, together with the *Lega Nord's* leader Umberto Bossi, he had signed a bill on stricter immigration regulations provided reservations among the members of the European People's Party over the perspective inclusion of *Alleanza Nazionale* MPs in its parliamentary group in Strasbourg Assembly.

The break with the past was carried out mainly by the party leader but among its members the picture was less clear, displaying in some cases political attitudes close to the traditional MSI both in terms of authoritarian values and in the evaluation of the fascist regime: a difference that had been already emphasized by political scientists¹. Despite increasing its external attractiveness by emphasizing the "new course" of its program², the political positions adopted by the party reflected only the choices of a very restricted inner circle of party leaders. AN was governed according to the principle of "plebiscitary centralism", in which the party leader (now called President), had almost absolute power over the internal decision-making bodies, appointed half of the members of the National Assembly, exerted full control over financing resources. The President also violated the party statute, which stipulated the need of organizing a conference every three years, whereas only three conferences took place from 1995 to 2009. This, however, did not prevent the flourishing of internal factions that competed for hegemony within the party, though Fini's leadership was never questioned, and sought to influence ideologically the AN's official position. This explains why the programmatic document presented at the 2002 National Party Congress was drafted by a committee made up of representatives of the three internal factions of the party.

Fini adopted the strategy of *Divide et impera* but such divisions raised notable friction within the party. The clear-cut negative judgment on fascism pronounced in Jerusalem provoked an uproar amongst the members and resulted into the departure of Alessandra Mussolini, who founded *Alternativa Sociale* (an umbrella coalition of extreme right parties including *Forza Nuova* and *Fronte nazionale*)³, Francesco Storace organized a public meeting to express the dissent of many AN members and three senior party leaders which had been or would be in the future Ministers, Altero Matteoli, Maurizio Gasparri and Ignazio La Russa, harshly criticized Fini's attitudes (and, as a result, they were immediately removed from their office). The poor performance of the Centre-Right alliance in the 2005 regional elections where the House of Freedoms only won in Lombardy and Veneto – thanks to the Northern League, which had maintained its strongholds – increased the difficulties.

¹ See Piero IGNAZI, "Gianfranco Fini è in fuga ma il suo plotone arranca", *Il Mulino*, vol. XLVII, no. 3, 1998, pp. 233-240.

² See Mara MORINI, "Movimento Sociale Italiano-Alleanza Nazionale", in Luciano BARDI, Piero IGNAZI, Oreste MASSARI (eds), *I partiti italiani*, Università Bocconi Editore, Milano, 2007, pp. 149-174.

³ See Marco TARCHI, "The Far Right Italian Style", in Xavier CASALS (ed.), *Political Survival on the Extreme Right*, Institut de Ciències Polítiques I Socials, Barcelona, 2005, pp. 35-49. In the 1994 European elections, both *Alternativa Sociale* and the *Movimento Sociale-Fiamma Tricolore* obtained one seat at the Strasbourg Parliament.

The Risks of the "Cold Fusion" and the Diaspora

The disagreements within the coalition, bringing forward the resignation of several ministers and the crisis of the second Berlusconi cabinet, immediately followed by the third one, suggested the Centre-Right to present itself at the 2006 general elections with a more articulated formula, emphasizing the peculiar programs tabled by FI, AN and CCD. The defeat, albeit by a narrow margin, left room to Fini to make further efforts of ideological repositioning to move towards the Centre, with the purpose of obtaining membership to the EPP¹, even at the cost of causing the exit of the populist wing of *Alleanza Nazionale*, loyal to the MSI heritage, led by Storace, and of increasing the dissent of other cadres, who had already broke the dogma of the unanimous support for any leader's decision, in force since the foundation of AN. The former president of Lazio Region founded in 2007 a new party, *La Destra* and some unsuccessful attempts of gathering together the fragmented milieu of the "radical right" were organized.

Contrary to the Fini's hopes, his strategy was soon hampered and overshadowed by Berlusconi's invitation, in November 2007, to merge all the forces of the Centre-Right into a unified party, *il Popolo della Libertà*. This move, inspired by the desire of counterweighing the birth, on the Centre-Left, of the *Partito democratico*, was at first strongly opposed by Fini, who wanted to increase his distance from the ally and declared to the press that the dissolution of *Alleanza Nazionale* and its confluence into the new subject was absolutely beyond dispute. But a few months later, under the pressure of elections just around the corner and the fear of loss of votes, widespread within his inner circle, he changed his mind and, contrary to his former ally Pierferdinando Casini, leader of the *Unione di Centro* (UCD, former CCD), agreed to run the race under a joint list under the new label. The vague identity of the new Berlusconi's creature disappointed some of the voters that AN has previously attracted, so contributing both to the fairly good result of *La Destra* (2.4%) and to the growth of the *Lega Nord* (8.3%), but the success of the new strategy of the Centre-Right was clear, as the PDL lists got 37.4% of the votes, 2% more than the overall score of FI and AN in 2006. Forced to admit the persisting hegemony of the *Cavaliere* on the moderate electorate, Fini did not accept the hypothesis of a federative agreement with the PDL, suggested by some of his followers, and held on 21-22 March 2009 a purely formal third Congress of the party to announce both the dissolution of *Alleanza Nazionale* and its merger into the new party.

The "cold fusion", despite the entry to government with four ministers, the election of Gianni Alemanno as mayor of Rome and the Fini's appointment as President of the Chamber of Deputies, worsened previous rifts with the allies and created new ones. Within PDL, a party based on Berlusconi's personal leadership, Fini was, for the first time in twenty years, no longer the number one – his official status was simply that of a "co-founder" –, and his charisma was weakening among his followers. His reiterated anti-fascist statements had contributed to distance him from an increasing sector of the AN rank and file, and even some members of his inner circle were reluctant to subscribe his "progressive" opinions on many issues².

¹ See Piero IGNAZI, "Legitimation and Evolution on the Italian Right Wing: Social and Ideological Repositioning of *Alleanza Nazionale* and the *Lega Nord*", *South European Society & Politics*, vol. X, no. 2, 2005, pp. 333-349.

² See Piero IGNAZI, "La destra trionfante", *Il Mulino*, vol. LVII, no. 4, 2008, pp. 432-440.

As a result, the PDL parliamentarians and elected representatives in local institutions proceeding from AN split into two separate groups: *Berlusconiani*, close to the new leader, and *Finiiani*, faithful for their historical leader. Incorporating party officials and members into the new party proved hard to implement due to the failure of sharing a common organizational structure: AN still had a large network of territorial units, whereas *Forza Italia* since its birth had adopted the model of the "light party" with a very restricted structure¹. Furthermore, the decision that 70% of political positions and electoral candidatures would be granted to former FI members whilst only 30% would be reserved to former AN members highlighted the inequality of treatment of both founding parties by increasing conflicts within the party.

Between 2008 and 2010, relations deteriorated between Berlusconi and Fini who, by taking advantage of his institutional role, repeatedly made public complaints against PDL's political choices and Berlusconi's personal behaviour. Fini's strategy was more and more clear: having lost any hope of being appointed by the PDL leader as his successor, he was trying to gain credit as an impartial statesman, who could be accepted by the Centre-Left opposition as Prime Minister if Berlusconi would be forced to resign in consequence of a conviction in one or more of the judicial proceedings in which he had got involved. After a long series of conflicts, at the April 2011 National Committee of the party, Fini broke away from Berlusconi, who had become intolerant to his ally's criticism, and was forced to quit the PDL²; but only 44 MPs and a limited number of local councillors followed him. Yet, Fini's attempt to reunite all his former followers from *Alleanza Nazionale*, thus forcing Berlusconi to leave the lead of the government, failed. Many AN leading figures criticized the attitude of their former leader and confirmed their loyalty to the PDL.

In order to avoid the risk of isolation, Fini launched a new party, *Futuro e Libertà per l'Italia* (FLI), which was welcomed by Centrist and Centre-Left parties and media, but appeared as a traitor not only by Berlusconi but also by many members originating from MSI and AN. In October 2011 the FLI parliamentary group, along with all the other opposition groups, past a vote of no-confidence to the PDL-LN cabinet but the motion was rejected by a narrow majority. This defeat was a negative turning-point for Fini's ambition, showing that his support was not enough to the opposition to form a new majority. Moreover the new party experienced internal troubles for the poor performance in the run-up to local elections and weakened by a constant trickle of defections, that caused the fragmentation of its MPs patrol: many of them split to form another parliamentary group, *I responsabili*, which supported the cabinet. The attempt to build a Centrist pole in a hypothetical "Party of the Nation", including the UDC and another moderate party, *Alleanza per l'Italia* (API), combined with a strong support for the Monti "technical" government that followed the Berlusconi's resignation in November 2011, did not avoid the rapid decline of Fini's party. At the general elections of February 2013, *Futuro e Libertà* registered a disastrous 0.4% of votes, which sanctioned its exclusion from Parliament and its condemnation to become an irrelevant political actor.

¹ See Emanuela POLI, *Forza Italia. Strutture, leadership e radicamento territoriale*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2001.

² See Susanna TURCO, *Che fai, mi cacci? La sfida impossibile di Gianfranco Fini*, Marsilio, Venezia, 2011.

FLI was not the only victim of the neofascist *diaspora*. Fini's controversial behaviour brought negative consequences to his former fellow members, sanctioning internal divisions among them. Within the PDL, the first group, loyal to Berlusconi, was marginalized and its presence reduced in the electoral lists. Other AN cadres, led by former ministers La Russa and Meloni, formed a new, more nationalist and right-wing party, *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy), with the unwavering purpose of recreating the National Alliance, that with 1.9% of the vote acquired only nine elected members. *La Destra* did even more poorly by scoring only 0.6%. The lists of the Radical Right – *Forza Nuova*, *CasaPound Italia*, *Movimento sociale-Fiamma tricolore* – took on the whole only 0.4% of votes. Research suggests that many former MSI and AN followers shifted their votes to the populist movement headed by Beppe Grillo, attracted by its anti-establishment stances. Twenty years after *Tangentopoli*, the wave that had brought the "National Right" from the margin of politics to the centre of power¹ has now reached such a low ebb, leaving behind the rests of a long and controversial history. The inability to preserve its own identity as distinct amongst its allies, as well as in the eyes of its opponents, has destroyed the ambitions raised by the collapse of the old party system in 1993 among AN members and leaders.

In spite of the electoral disaster, however, not all the advocates of an autonomous Right force are resigned to choose between the abstention from the polls and the vote for one of the Center-Right parties (*Forza Italia* and *Nuovo Centrodestra*) where many of the AN cadres have found their home. Some projects have been presented by post-fascist notables. Giorgia Meloni and Ignazio La Russa, leaders of *Fratelli d'Italia*, in order to enlarge their audience, have launched *Officina per l'Italia*, an open association which has organized a first meeting with some well-known personalities of the Right like the former AN MPs Gianni Alemanno, Adolfo Urso, Mario Landolfi and Silvano Moffa, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Monti cabinet Giulio Terzi, and the anti-Islamic journalist Magdi Allam. With an even more clear purpose of referring to a regretted past, Francesco Storace created the *Movimento per l'Alleanza Nazionale*. The rebirth of the "social, popular and identitarian soul" of the Right is the basis of another initiative, the more radical *Progetto per l'Italia*. After the Fini's eclipse, Roberto Menia is keeping FLI alive, while some of his former fellows animate the think-tank *Fare futuro*. Many other local groups appeal to the reunion of the fragmented post-fascist archipelago, but none of them seems, at the moment, to be up to this hard task.

Conclusions

After a long period of isolation caused by its identification with Fascism, the Italian Right emerged strongly from the ashes of the First Republic in 1993, beset by the scandals of *Tangentopoli*. The administrative elections of 1993 and the general election of 1994 showed that since there was no longer a Communist threat, a large part of the Italian public opinion tended to express conservative views, albeit in rather different ways. Disappointed with the corrupted ruling class, citizens were in search of new political forces. *Forza Italia* was especially appealing to anti-state "liberal revolution" supporters. MSI-DN and then AN were popular amongst those citizens

¹ See Antonio CARIOTI, "Dal ghetto al palazzo: l'ascesa di *Alleanza Nazionale*", in Piero IGNAZI, Robert S. KATZ (eds), *Politica in Italia. Edizione 95*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1995, pp. 73-95.

who wanted to reaffirm law and order policies, to call for an increased sense of the state and respond to threats to national identity (immigration, secessionist claims). CCD and CDU were seen with favour by the Catholic traditionalists.

The success of the Centre-Right coalition, despite this heterogeneity of expectations and perspectives, can be explained by two factors: the persistent hostility of a large sector of the Italian society against the Left and the presence of a unifying leader, a successful entrepreneur, who presented himself as a newcomer. Under these conditions, combined with the privileged condition of owning the Italian private TV companies Fininvest/Mediaset, Berlusconi managed for almost twenty years to maintain control over the fragile coalition he had founded. Such coalition had been repeatedly challenged by conflicting interests and ideological aspirations of each ally: after the break-up with *Lega Nord*, responsible for the electoral defeat of 1996, the frictions between FI, AN and CCD-CDU-UDC were frequent¹, eased only by the prospect of returning to government between 2000 and 2001, and emerged still in the next five years along striking issues, such as economic policy, relations with the European Union and institutional reforms.

After 2006, with the defection of the UDC and the critics of populism launched by AN against the *Lega Nord* and *Forza Italia*, the instability of the coalition increased, but it was counterbalanced by the failure of the *Unione*, the incoherent coalition supporting the Prodi government, torn by serious internal conflicts. The success of the Centre-Right political alliance at the 2008 election mitigated only temporarily the internal tensions, triggered by Gianfranco Fini, sceptical about the opportunity to succeed Berlusconi as leader of PDL, but convinced, in the face of the economic crisis, of the possibility of being appointed to head a transitional government with the support of the Centre-Left. Between 2010 and 2011, Fini's expectation failed: the creation of FLI was not enough to defeat Berlusconi government in Parliament, and when the weakness of the executive in dealing with the financial crisis forced the *Cavaliere* to resign from the Presidency of the Council, Mario Monti succeeded him at the head of a technical government. The support for Monti's government was far from unanimous within the PDL: the party was close to division and its parliamentary majority was being gradually eroded, but also FLI was at pains after the coalition with centrist showed not to be a profitable alliance.

In the February 2013 General Election, PDL lost considerable support at the benefit of *Scelta civica di Monti* (Monti's Civic List), but most significantly of the Five-Star Movement, which had already in the 2012 local elections attracted Right-wing voters keen to oppose the rise of the Centre-Left parties. The Centre-Right, despite a poor showing, lost the election by an unexpected tiny margin, but the decline of bipolarism diminished its capacity of undertaking initiatives, condemning it to depend on the others' actions and decisions, and the drastic reduction of candidates with an AN background in its list was an alarm bell for the "national Right". Without a new ruling class, with an evident shift of its coalition partners to the Centre, with its organizational network fragmented and weakened, the destiny of the Italian Right is uncertain, and will be influenced by factors difficult to control, first of them the future succession to Berlusconi and the fate of *Forza Italia* after his inevitable retirement.

¹ See Emanuela POLI, Marco TARCHI, "The Parties of the *Polo*: united to What End?", in David HINE, Salvatore VASSALLO (eds), *Italian Politics. The Return of Politics*, Berghahn Books, New York-Oxford, 2000, pp. 65-85.

Given that, its potential electorate, according to the pollsters, is rather wide, although eroded by temporary defections and abstentions, and a deep process of renewal in the organizational structure and in the programmatic platform is deemed to take place soon or later. In what direction and by whom, it is rather arduous to predict under the current circumstances.

ANNEX

Table 1

Main Right Parties in Italian General Elections, 1994-2013 – % of Vote

	1994	1996	2001	2006	2008	2013
PDL					37,38	21,56 *
AN	13,47	15,66	12,02	12,34	-	-
MS-FT		0,91	0,39	0,60		0,13
<i>La Destra</i>					2,43**	0,65
FLI						0,46
<i>Fratelli d'Italia</i>						1,95
<i>Forza Nuova</i>			0,04		0,30	0,26
<i>Fronte Nazionale</i>			0,04			
<i>Alternativa Sociale</i>				0,67		
<i>CasaPound Italia</i>						0,14

Source: Italian Ministry of the Interior. (*) Since 2008 Fi e An ran together as the Pdl. (***) In 2008 *La Destra* and MS-FT ran together. (***) In 2006 *Forza Nuova* and *Fronte Nazionale* ran together as *Alternativa Sociale*.

