

## Right-Wing Rural Populisms: Comparative Analysis of Two European Regions\*

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**ABSTRACT** The most significant political fact of the latest elections within the European Union is the growth, in all states, of right-wing “populist” political formations. Alongside this, one of the most relevant aspects is the significant share of support that these “parties” have in suburban, peripheral and rural areas. Starting from this premise, the first part of the article aims to discuss the relevance of the rural-urban dichotomy and how territorial differences are an important factor in the growth of right-wing populism. The second part proposes a comparative analysis of the political trends recorded in recent years in two economically advanced European regions: Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes (France) and Lombardia (Italy). The analysis of the official results of the 2019 European elections and of the previous elections in the two regions, shows the entrenchment in rural areas of the consensus for right-wing populist formations (Lega and Rassemblement National) but also the presence of different discourses and political strategies, which reveal the different nuances that rural populism can take.

### Introduction

The most significant political figure of the last electoral appointments within the European Union (think of the national deadlines and the European elections of 26 May 2019) is the steady growth of “populist” political formations in terms of the number of votes intercepted in all states, particularly those that claim to be located on the right in the traditional political spectrum. By populist political formations, we mean a vast and heterogeneous set of movements that have some common traits, such as the opposition to the establishment, the proposal of an authoritarian style and the emphasis on nativism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Other recurring traits, related to their rightward orientation, include criticism of expert knowledge (Latour 2018) and positions critical of immigration and multicultural society (Inglehart and Norris 2016). Alongside these, one of the most significant aspects is the considerable share of consensus that these political subjects register, especially in suburban and rural areas.

The repeated confirmations of the link between voting orientation and territorial scale highlight the influence exerted by the differences between the center and the periphery, strong-weak areas, large-small

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centers, city-countryside on the election results. Generally speaking, a distinction is made between, on the one hand, the rural and peripheral areas which reinforce “anti-system” positions and, for example, express a radical critique of the European Union, market globalization and the traditional political establishment, and on the other hand, the progressive and pro-European urban poles, which are in favor of increasing inter-connections between different regions, states, and areas of the planet.

This does not lead to postulate an associative automatism between rurality and populism, and between urbanity and populism but to identify a useful starting point to recognize the many factors at stake that revolve around the territorial data.

Starting from this premise, the first part of the contribution is aimed at providing an overview of the concept of populism and the populist movement, understood at times as an emerging mindset, widespread political style largely associated with ideologies laden with sovereign nationalism, however embodied by some movements that prove particularly attractive for the part of the electorate located in an extra-urban context.

After having clarified these definition aspects, the second part of the contribution aims to reflect on the correlation between the vote for popular formations and urban/rural areas through a comparative analysis of the political trends recorded in recent years in two European regions: Auvergne-Rhône-Alps (France) and Lombardy (Italy). The aim is to bring out the different models of territorial distribution of the right-wing populist vote in the two regions and at the same time explore the characteristics and transformations that populist forces are experiencing in these two contexts.

Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes and Lombardy are among the most populous and industrialized regions of Europe, which constitute an important share of the domestic product of the country of origin (Eurostat 2019). In addition to the important economic results in terms of wealth production (Table 1), these areas also carry out leadership activities in the European Union in the field of industrial innovation, research and development, training and universities, climate and environment, transport and mobility, health, and agriculture. Due to the high rate of industrialization and urbanization, these are contexts in which the economic, social, and cultural gap between city and countryside is particularly visible and marked.

The analysis of the voting orientation in the various areas of the two regions will allow us to show that in these contexts the support of populist forces is a heterogeneous grouping comprising municipalities in rural areas, small mountain centers, residential and tourist municipalities, valleys and peripheral areas that have the common trait of not being a city. In particular, we will focus on the elements of continuity

and discontinuity of the political discourses proposed by the right-wing populist forces most active in the two regions, the Lega (known as “Lega Nord,” before the 2018 political elections) and the Rassemblement National (known as “Front National,” before the 2018). These are two formations that politically look to the right, which have a prevalent rootedness in rural areas, peripheral and far from the cities. They are the promoters of a “right-wing rural populism” that in terms of speeches and political proposals follows different patterns than, for example, the left-wing rural movements for food sovereignty (Borras 2019). The “right-wing rural populism” proposes some typical traits of right-wing populist discourse (Betz 1994; Greven 2016) and is fueled by a plurality of factors such as the crisis of globalized neoliberal capitalism that makes some European rural areas marginal, the problems of agricultural change, the perceived threat to local traditions and identities (Mamonova and Franquesa 2019; Strijker, Voerman and Terluin 2015).

### **Rural-Urban: From Sociological Dichotomy to Political Dichotomy?**

In the history of sociological thought, sometimes subtly and at other times in more explicit terms, rural-urban opposition has often been used to explain social change or the differences between culture and ways of life. It must be fundamentally noted that the most immediate and disruptive effects of changing the balance between these two terms has been conserved above all in the urbanization process, in many cases associated with industrialization. The same transition from the Community (*Gemeinschaft*) to the Society (*Gesellschaft*), published by Ferdinand Toennis (1887), appears as a passage from a type of rural and mainly metropolitan environment. Some authors then understood the rural-urban dichotomy as a foundation in the physical, territorial but also historical sense of that community-society. Among these, the first great protagonists of the birth of rural sociology and urban sociology, who promoted a series of studies focusing specifically on the rural condition or urban experience (Jayapalan 2020), should be mentioned. The authors such as Oswald Spengler, Pitirim Sorokin and Carle Zimmerman, Oscar Handlin and Robert Redfield who focus on the characters of man, a typology that, as they themselves have to admit, is close to extinction for ever more incessant physical and cultural penetration of the urban in the countryside. Among the characteristics that they note, mention should be made of attachment to native soil, respect for tradition, work for the community and limited selfishness, proximity and stability of relationships, aspects which, as can be easily understood, coincide in full with the typical characteristics of the community man mentioned above. Robert Redfield, in particular in the work *The small community, society and*

*peasant culture* (1955), believes that the community is such only when it is peculiar, self-sufficient and small. The second strand, the more clearly definable one of urban sociology, includes authors such as George Simmel and Louis Wirth, who analyze the most typical manifestations of metropolitan life and its repercussions on individual psychology. They observe that the instability, the superficiality of relationships and still indifference, the prevalence of a utilitarian logic and finally a sophisticated attitude, are born from excesses in the nervous stimulation typical of the urbanity that Simmel defines blasé. In this perspective, the rural is not the place of innovation and change that instead identify the city.

Another contribution comes from the researchers from the Chicago School who try not to embrace the thesis that the affirmation of the urban and the expansion of the city inevitably coincide with the complete disappearance of the rural community. In fact, they themselves take on particular urban typologies such as the neighborhood, the ghetto, the slum and the small towns, where, contrary to the expectations of a certain sociological tradition, traces of community life and sometimes the persistence of ways of thinking are found, and traditions typical of the farming world. In any case, the rural territories embody forms of particularism often opposed to the universalism of the city. Rural areas can be understood as “natural areas” or as spatially defined units, limited by natural borders, which contain a sufficiently static population with homogeneous features. The essential features of belonging to a rural area are expressed by observing an organized population on a territory; a deeply lived link, by individuals, with the geographical environmental reality; a relationship of mutual symbiotic interdependence between the members. Together with a certain nostalgia with which the rural way of life is recalled, it is clear that an entire tradition gives us the “rural” as a weak term, forced to undergo the influence of what is “urban,” and in one state of passivity and immobility that make it what is commonly called modern at the antipodes. More than a century after the reflections of the first sociologists, we can say that the rural–urban dichotomy, which seemed archived, has become topical again in some areas of Europe, to the point of influencing electoral choices and voting behavior, but also political orientations that sometimes rediscover, sometimes elaborate an “agrarian myth.” It is linked to the rediscovery of a rural or anti-urban identity, in opposition to the elite and to decisions taken from above, without considering the interests of the people and the territories (Brass 1997). The rural person seems to show signs of impatience and there is even talk of revenge on the countryside (Barberis 2009). What raises its head is a very different campaign from what we have known for most of the twentieth century. It is a space wholly covered by the contradictions

of a time like ours; a universe of relationships with wider links, but also more solid, more capable of resistances and adaptations. The campaign becomes an undisputed polarity of the territorial game, but it also enters more and more into the identity and political dynamics (Rodríguez-Pose 2019).

In this way, new city-country contrasts emerge as well as a radicalization of the conflicts between the center and the peripheries, on a cultural, political, and economic level (Ardeni 2020). Some speak of a re-release, under new guise, of the “Vendée wars,” which erupted in that rural region against the revolutionary government of Paris by Catholic peasants, under the guidance of representatives of the small nobility, against the new republican regime considered illegitimate. Thus it happens that some elements of rurality pointed out by classical sociological thought seem to be taken up also in the political discourses of the movements that have the most consistent basis of their consensus in the rural world. The term rurality is, however, far from univocal. It is a concept of synthesis of local situations with low density of inhabitants, with a varying degree of periphery, with economies in difficulty that refer to the idea of fragile and weak areas (Carrosio 2019) or to strong territories in terms of production, but which maintain the characteristics of areas characterized by a mild housing density, by a greater abundance of spaces, by a prevalence of the earth compared to cement.

Focusing attention on two concrete cases of penetration of the right-wing populism within rural areas inserted in two motor regions of Europe, will allow us to understand if today’s rural belonging is a causal factor of new political orientations. At the same time it will help us to notice how a series of notions revolving around “rurality” have entered political language and are used by it to feed Eurosceptic and anti-globalization rhetoric, and anti-urban positions (Rodden 2019) as well as local defense against agro-business (Loka 2018; van der Ploeg 2018). To understand the populist tendencies within the two regions considered below, it is important to grasp the links between the populist vote and the particular meaning that the rural-urban dichotomy assumes today in those contexts.

### **Comparative Analysis of Two Regions’ Theater of Right-Wing Rural Populism**

Auvergne-Rhône Alpes and Lombardy are among the most populous and richest regions of the European Union, being economic locomotives of their respective countries. These are contexts with a dense productive fabric which present a rather clear leap between highly industrialized

and internationalized urban areas, and rural areas with a low population density.

Auvergne-Rhône Alpes and Lombardy, together with Baden-Württemberg (Germany) and Catalonia (Spain), belong to the association “Four engines for Europe.” This group was formed in 1988 to support collaborative projects between the various regional actors. In this perspective, various innovative projects and numerous economic, scientific and academic exchanges have been undertaken, as well as numerous initiatives promoted by civil society.

It is also for these converging characteristics that it is believed that the chosen territories can represent an interesting test to evaluate, in a comparative perspective, the different patterns of consensus distribution for right-wing populist parties between peripheral/rural areas and urban or peri-urban areas. This, knowing well of the plurality of factors involved, and that at the base of the differences and similarities between regions and parties there are also historical factors concerning the individual regions and the political national context in which they are inserted (Greven 2016). In particular, it is useful to dwell, from a diachronic perspective, on the trend of electoral support (based on official data) of the two right-wing populist parties (Lega and Rassemblement National), in the 2019 European elections and in previous national and regional elections.

### **Auvergne-Rhône Alpes**

Auvergne-Rhône Alpes region was officially established following the reform of the regional structure approved by the French Parliament in 2014. It aggregates the pre-existing Auvergne region, with the capital of the city of Clermont-Ferrand, including the Departments of Allier (03), Cantal (15), Haute-Loire (43), Puy-de-Dôme (63) and the Rhône Alpes region, with the Departments of Ain (01), Ardèche (07), Drôme (26), Isère (38), Loire (42), Rhône, Savoy (73) and Haute Savoie (74) plus the metropolitan capital of Lyon. Also due to the morphology of the territory, which sees the presence of the mountainous area of the Massif Central and Alpes, the population is not homogeneously distributed over the territory, with a greater concentration in the heart of the region represented by the urban area of the city of Lyon and near the urban centers the production sites of Clermont-Ferrand, Saint-Étienne, Grenoble, Villeurbanne. The Departments with the lowest population density are located along the “perimeter” of the region (Allier, Cantal, Haute Loire, Ardèche, Drôme, Savoy). These Departments also face demographic difficulties with an increasing average age of the population. In particular, in the Auvergne territory, the capital cities represent more than 30

percent of the population, while rural areas, after a strong rural exodus in the early twentieth century, have lost most of their population.

Auvergne-Rhône Alpes belongs to the so-called motor regions of Europe and is one of the most productive areas of France, second only to the Île-de-France region in terms of GDP importance.

Before the merger in the same region, from 2004 to 2015 the Auvergne was administered by members of the French Socialist Party (Pierre-Joël Bonté 2004–2006 and René Souchon 2006–2015), and the Rhône Alpes was administered by the Union de la Gauche (Jean-Jack Queyrann 2004–2015). Since the 2015 regional elections, the Auvergne-Rhône Alpes has been led by a coalition comprising the Republican Party, the Democratic Movement and the Democratic and Independent Union, a set of political forces with a centrist and liberal orientation.

The political force that seems to best represent the populist turning point in France and in the specific region of Auvergne-Rhône Alpes is the Front National (Genga 2017), re-named starting from 2018 as Rassemblement National. The party was founded in 1972 by some far-right activists, including Jean-Marie Le Pen, who was the undisputed leader until his daughter Marine Le Pen was elected president in 2011 (Albertini and Doucet 2014).

Taking the last three electoral rounds as reference, it emerges that in the first round of the 2015 regional elections the Front National (traditionally strong in the administrative rounds) obtained 25.5 percent of the votes, ranking second after the Union of Democrats and Independents that reached 31.7 percent. In the first round of the 2017 Presidential election, leader Marine Le Pen collected 20.7 percent of the consensus (compared to 24.5 percent of Emmanuel Macron). In the 2019 European elections, the Rassemblement National was the most voted party in the region with 22.7 percent of the votes, followed by En Marche (21 percent), Environmental Party (15 percent), and Republicans (10.4 percent).

The detailed analysis of the voting trend in the 12 Departments that make up the region Auvergne-Rhône Alpes shows a rather polarized trend (Table 2). In the 2015 regional elections, consensus for the Front National ranged from 31.2 percent in Ain to 18.2 percent in Haute-Loire. In the first round of the 2017 presidential election, consensus for Marine Le Pen went from 16.3 percent in the Rhone to 25 percent in Ain. In the 2019 European elections the consensus for the Rassemblement National fluctuates between 17 percent of the Rhône Department and 25.4 percent of Allier. Considering the two reference cities of the region, lower consensus levels are encountered by the Front National/Rassemblement National. In the center of Lyon, the Front National/Rassemblement

National reached 15.1 percent in the 2015 regional ones, 8.9 percent with Marine Le Pen in the first round of the 2017 Presidential elections. Also in Lyon, in the European 2019, the Rassemblement National party finished with 10.3 percent, ranking fourth after En Marche (28.8 percent), Verdi (21 percent), and Republicans (10.4 percent). In Clermont Ferrand, in the other city of reference (former capital of Auvergne), the Front National/Rassemblement National reached 16 percent in the regional 2015, Marine Le Pen at the 2017 Presidential elections collected a consensus of 12.6 percent and Rassemblement National 23 percent in the 2019 European Championships, showing strong growth.

Recent analysis shows that the consensus for the Rassemblement National is connected to a sort of urban gradient such that the party increases consensus when moving away from urban centers.

The Auvergne-Rhône Alpes region is located just below the Saint Malo/Geneva line which, according to some, traces the border between the southern areas with the highest Rassemblement National influence and the northern ones where the Rassemblement National has lower consensus (Fourquet 2019). All this with local cadres in which it is confirmed that a certain polarization between urban and peripheral/rural areas feeds the frontist consensus. Consensus tends to grow in places that, in addition to the periphery and present situations of economic difficulty, (deindustrialization) are confronted with the effects of entering a new phase of capitalism (Harvey 1989).

This explains why in the Auvergne-Rhône Alpes a rather limited consensus can be observed in peripheral departments, but with a lively local economic system based on tourism (think of the ski resorts of Haute-Savoie) or in areas with prestigious wine production. Rassemblement National is rooted mainly in economically more fragile or distressed areas where signs of crisis, such as an increase in unemployment, are felt. The low level of infrastructure also seems to have some weight, especially if related to the lack of road networks (Ifop 2019). Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that the consensus for the main force of the Auvergne-Rhône Alpes is also linked to a growing lukewarmness toward the European Union, paradoxically, precisely in areas usually favored by the common agricultural policy. We know that it is in these provinces that the anti-elite resentment that fueled the Lepenist movement and (in part) the very mobilization of the “Gilets Jaunes” has matured (Ferrera 2019).

### **Lombardy**

Lombardy is located in northern Italy, in the center of the most economically advanced European area, it is a bridge to the Mediterranean Sea.



Its strategic position also places it geographically on the main east-west axis of Europe, with an area of almost 24,000 km<sup>2</sup> and over 10 million inhabitants. The gross domestic product (GDP) of Lombardy is around 22 percent of the Italian GDP. In terms of economic performance, Lombardy's GDP is higher than that of many EU Member States. As for the population, Lombardy is the third most populous region in Europe, after Île-de-France and Baden-Württemberg. The territory is divided into 1,506 municipalities (being the region with the largest number of municipalities in the whole national territory), distributed in twelve large area entities (eleven provinces plus the metropolitan city of Milan).

In recent decades, politically, it has been the largest reservoir of votes for the Lega Nord, the party currently led by Matteo Salvini. LN is a party born between 1989 and 1991 from the federation of six regional autonomist movements active in northern Italy and led for over twenty years by the historic leader Umberto Bossi (Biorcio 2010). In its history it has achieved some electoral successes by participating in the national government in center-right coalitions, in four moments: 1994, 1999–2003, 2008–2011, 2018. Even in the coalitions, the party has stably administered the main regions of northern Italy over the past 30 years regions. In the 2018 political elections, it changed its name to the Lega for Salvini Premier. The Tables 3–4 shows the distribution of this party's consensus among the Lombardy provinces.

The Tables compare Salvini's consensus to the party in the 2013 and 2018 political elections (Cfr. Tentoni 2019).

Territorially, the consensus for the Lega Nord seems to follow a gradient that starts from the still high percentages of the main cities (Milan 27.4 percent; Brescia 35.4 percent, given the latest Europeans) and grows more or less regularly as you move away from the urban areas. This aspect is even clearer if it is observed that the votes for the party led by Matteo Salvini increase as the demographic amplitude of the municipalities decreases, reaching the peak of consensus in the centers of less than 5 thousand inhabitants, where it stands well beyond the threshold of 50 percent, reaching, in some cases, up to 75 percent.

In the political elections of 4 March 2018 and in the European elections of 26 May 2019, a consensus growth trend was consolidated in favor of the political formation of the Lega Nord, which can be explained for the most part by the contrast and polarization between the vote in large urban centers and small provincial municipalities. The Lega Nord's exploit went hand in hand with the implosion of the center-left. In defining the new political framework, the consistent shift of votes between the parties weighed heavily, an aspect that emerges when comparing the results in the Chamber of the 2013 and 2018 political elections. The

**Table 1. GDP Trend in the Two Regions Analyzed.**

Region (NUTS 2016)	GDP		Share in National GDP		GDP Per Capita		GDP Per Capita	
	€ million	€	%	€	PPS	PPS, EU28=100		
Auvergne-Rhône Alpes	263,149	33,000	11.5	30,000	100			
Lombardy	380,955	38,000	22.1	38,500	128			

*Fonte:* Eurostat 2019.

**Table 2. Electoral Consensus for the Front National/Rassemblement National in Some Elections (%)—Period 2004–2019.**

Department	Regional Elections				Presidential Elections				European Elections			
	2004	2010	2015	2007	2012	2017	2009	2014	2019	2009	2014	2019
Ain	20.5	15.6	31.2	12.3	20.7	25	7.6	28.5	24.3	7.6	28.5	24.3
Allier	10.8	9.2	24.7	10.1	18.3	22.3	4.9	24.5	25.4	4.9	24.5	25.4
Haute Loire	13.6	12.1	18.2	11.7	20.4	23.1	6.1	25.4	22.5	6.1	25.4	22.5
Haute-Savoie	18.5	13.2	26.3	9.7	16.6	18.9	6.7	23.5	18.1	6.7	23.5	18.1
Ardèche	16.4	13.1	25.8	11.4	20	23.2	6.6	25.4	23.5	6.6	25.4	23.5
Cantal	7.4	5.3	17.4	8.2	15.1	18.2	3.5	19.4	20.9	3.5	19.4	20.9
Drôme	19.2	14.9	29.2	12	21	23.9	7.8	25.7	23.4	7.8	25.7	23.4
Isère	16.9	13.1	27.7	10.1	19	22.3	6.5	24.3	21.9	6.5	24.3	21.9
Loire	19.3	17	28.5	12	21.6	24.1	7.9	27.6	24.6	7.9	27.6	24.6
Puy-de-Dôme	8	7.4	19.7	8.2	15.6	17.7	3.8	19.9	19.2	3.8	19.9	19.2
Rhone	18.3	13.2	28.8	9.1	15.1	16.3	6.1	20.7	17.0	6.1	20.7	17.0
Savoie	16.3	12.7	27.7	11.8	18.9	21.7	6.6	24.5	21.1	6.6	24.5	21.1

Fonte: Ministère de l'Intérieur.

**Table 3. Electoral Consensus for the Lega Nord—Lega Salvini Premier regional and European Elections (%)—Period 2009–2019.**

Province	Regional Elections			European Elections		
	2010	2013	2018	2009	2014	2019
Milano	17.3	7.5	22.2	14.7	9.2	34.1
Brescia	30.1	16.5	34.4	28.9	18.7	49.6
Bergamo	36.9	19.2	36.7	32.9	20.5	51.1
Como	33.3	15.6	32.6	26.8	16.6	48.3
Cremona	25.4	12.1	33	21.9	15	46.5
Lodi	25.6	13.3	34	21.4	15.1	45.9
Mantova	22	11.7	28.3	20.8	10.8	43.5
Sondrio	42.4	31.9	45.8	41.5	33.9	53.4
Pavia	28.2	11.1	29.5	18.6	14.4	47.3
Lecco	32.2	13.7	33.4	26.1	15.9	45.1
Varese	30	16.3	30.1	26.3	16.7	46
Monza Brianza	24.4	11.6	28.6	20.4	12.7	41.5
	26.2	13	29.7		14.6	43.38

**Table 4. Electoral Consensus for the Lega Nord - Lega Salvini Premier Political Elections (%)—Period 2018—Results by Constituency Chamber of Deputies.**

Circumscription	Political Elections	
	2013	2018
Lombardy 1	8.7	22.08
Lombardy 2	17.5	31.93
Lombardy 3	10.9	34.33
Lombardy 4	13.6	28.29

Research Institute “C. Cattaneo” (2018) has conducted an analysis on some local situations by applying consolidated estimation techniques (Goodman model). Among the cases examined one can find, for example, the electoral sections of the city of Brescia which recorded “very interesting dynamics, and in some ways surprising.” One of the aspects dealt with is the bleeding of votes from the Democratic Party. According to the estimates provided, in the city of Brescia the Democratic Party has lost a substantial share of its voters (4.9 percent) toward the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5s) and significant shares of votes also toward the political formation of the left Liberi e Uguali (1.8 percent of the electoral body),

toward the abstention (1.8 percent) and even to the Lega Nord (1.6 percent). The various outgoing flows highlight the dissatisfaction and bewilderment of a part of the Brescia voters of this party. The erosion of the Democratic Party electorate has been a phenomenon known for some years. More than in the past, the local repercussions of national vicissitudes have weighed on the orientations of the Democratic Party electorate to the point that a part of voters has addressed the M5s in search of instances once interpreted by the center-left (e.g., legality, environment, participation, social protection).

In this context, Salvini's party, winner in all the provinces of Lombardy, has proved to be the only political container capable of gathering voters who have escaped from the other blocs and at the same time been able to keep their ranks tight. Added to this is the unprecedented ability to begin to be an attractive force also in the urban area, especially in the lower social strata which represent the basis of the consensus of the Lega Nord in the cities.

It is difficult to say whether these mechanisms will reactivate in the future and whether they will also have an impact on the administrative vote. Perhaps easier to recognize in the exchange of votes that took place in the last elections is the emergence in the electorate of new socio-cultural sensitivity, in which coexist (not without contradictions) typical elements of our time: widespread fears and insecurities, refusal to formalisms and hierarchies, traits of rebellion and improvisation, requests for new social protection and demand for innovation.

### **Convergences and Divergences Between Italian and French Rural Populisms**

In their action in the two regions considered, Matteo Salvini's and Marine Le Pen's parties show that they have a broad consensus base that is fueled by very similar political communication in which anti-European Union and anti-immigration messages are used, but also the idea that we must defend ourselves from the risk of losing a cultural identity by limiting the influence of globalization (Rodríguez-Pose 2017).

However, going deeper, you notice that the cases analyzed show that in recent years the intensity of the vote in favor of two populist formations (Lega Nord and Rassemblement National) does not follow the same territorial diffusion lines. Although they are also growing in the heart of large cities, these parties are gaining ground significantly moving away from it, to reach its maximum level in the surrounding areas of some urban centers and in some specific rural municipalities. The Marine Le Pen's party is rooted above all in areas that correspond to what it can call the "great peri-urban" whose inhabitants are still in the field of city

attraction but its outermost margins (Guilluy 2014). Matteo Salvini's party, on the other hand, is very rooted in the municipalities far from the large centers and especially in some mountain areas. In addition to the limited demographic amplitude, the only true trait that unites the markedly pro-populist areas is that of being "other" from the city and expressing its preference for political proposals based on simple categories of thought for some time now and who insist on referring to certain securities or to some form of territorial and identity roots in which "nativism" and "traditionalism" are recurring elements.

Starting from different territorial roots, the two populist parties share the same effort to penetrate in the new urban contexts (Corradi and Tacchi 2013), as evidenced by the fact that all the provincial capitals of Lombardy (including the city of Milan) are led by Center-left Mayors and as highlighted by the fact that the Rassemblement National governs a single French city with more than 100 thousand: Perpignan, conquered by Louis Aliot (also ex-partner of Marine Le Pen) in the election administrative of 2020.

The different roots of the two parties also influence their relationship with rural areas. In the case of Matteo Salvini, the rural world has always been an element of identity oriented toward the values of tradition and conservation. Salvini's attempt to transform his political formation into a national party (from "Lega Nord" to "Lega") has not halted autonomist and regionalist requests which continue to be present in the northern regions. For Marine Le Pen the feeling with the rural world is under construction, with the National Assembly being born primarily in the hardship incubators represented by the urban suburbs (Ivaldi and Gombin 2015). This party has also always been national and centralist, and has never revealed a desire to reorganize the French state in a federalist sense and to give more voice to the territories. In both cases, the use of the argument of the "agrarian myth" (Brass 1997) finds a place in the anti-globalization discourses (Gordon 2018), but it seems only in part in harmony with a campaign that today, in many cases, is also a place of innovation, exchange, and comparison.

A trait that instead seems to unite the two populist formations that well express their specific characteristics in Auvergne-Rhône Alpes and Lombardy, is the attempt to make less and less appeal to the anti-system protest or to the ideological revenge aiming at structuring a government proposal that, while maintaining populist traits, can intercept transverse consensus. This convergence follows different paths. On the one hand, the Lega Nord has already been in national government several times within center-right coalitions, and is leading important regions of the country such as Lombardy itself. All this cannot result in an anti-system

revolt, as this party is already well integrated into the structures that could be called into question. On the other hand, the Rassemblement National, the majority party in France in the last European elections, with 23 percent of the votes, considers this a strategy to access levels of power never previously managed, having always been in the opposition. The training led by Marine Le Pen benefits from strong roots in the peripheral and rural areas of the country. To make a leap in quantity and quality in consensus, in view of the race for the Elysée, an obligatory step will be the increase in consensus in the main urban centers, so far little or not at all attracted by the Lepenist rhetoric. The Rassemblement National collected important consensus in the small centers located in the southern belt of the country. But this is not enough and Marine Le Pen has initiated an important transformation of the party (accelerating the so-called “dédiabolisation”) aimed at confirming the consensus in the popular bands but also at intercepting the favors of the middle class.

### **Conclusive Reflections**

The aim of the text was to analyze the different models of territorial distribution of the populist vote in Auvergne-Rhône Alps and Lombardy and, at the same time, to explore the characteristics and transformations of the populist forces (Rassemblement National and Lega Nord) in these two contexts. The analysis of the data shows how the voting dynamics in the two regions and the consensus for the two parties follow a logical path in converging and partly divergent parts. This leads to highlight that they are different forms of rural populism. The relationship between Auvergne-Rhône Alpes and Rassemblement National is affected by the fact that this Party (at the beginning named National Front) was born in the early 70s in a predominantly urban context where it seeks to intercept consensus especially among the categories of people most affected by the economic and social crisis. In the early 2000s, the National Front substantially changed the basis of its consensus, drawing it mainly from rural areas (Ivaldi and Gombin 2015). The political program itself undergoes an evolution that increasingly incorporates agricultural values by proposing to defend the interests of farmers. Furthermore, the penetration into rural and peripheral areas on the margins of large cities (for example, in Auvergne-Rhône Alpes) takes place against the center-right and neo-Gaullist formations that traditionally represented the interests of those territories. The map of the vote in favor of the Front National/Rassemblement National increasingly reflects the geography of social and economic inequality (Ivaldi and Gombin 2015).

Compared to Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini must not penetrate the distant areas of the cities. Ruralism is in fact a trait present since the first

political discourses of the Lega Nord, which has always found consensus primarily in the major agricultural areas of the northern regions and less in the peri-urban or urban areas (Passarelli and Tuorto 2018). In its most recent developments Salvini is trying to nationalize the party by placing regional identities in the background in favor of defending a national identity. In this picture it is possible to identify two souls in the Lega. The first aims at the government of the country and uses ruralist rhetoric sparingly looking for a synthesis between rural and urban perspective. The second is more a Lega of territories (in line with the original soul of the movement), which does not disdain anti-system positions that are easily confused with anti-urban positions that recover traits of a traditionalist ruralism.

The territorial distribution of consensus for the populist forces studied is intertwined, albeit in a different way, with the geography of the economic crisis and inequality socio-economic in the two regions. Marine Le Pen collects consensus in the social phases on the margins of the economic system while Matteo Salvini intercepts consensus within the productive classes that are becoming impoverished and that perceive globalization and Europeanization as a threat to the defense of the status quo. This highlights how these rural populisms are affected by the problems created by the uneven capitalist development that is reflected in the territories but also by the historical legacies of the individual localities, on which the populist discourse every time tries to insert itself (Mamonova and Franquesa 2019). Finally, in the two political forces in recent years the signs of a gradual attenuation of anti-system protest and ideological radicalism and of a transition toward a government proposal which, albeit with populist traits (criticism of establishment, authoritarian style, nativism) can intercept a broader consensus, indispensable for conquering the leadership of the nation. This transformation means for the Rassemblement National to accelerate the “dédiabolization,” while for the Lega to make a turning point to become a real moderate party. These characteristic features show how in the two regions right-wing rural populism is moving toward new forms of proposal and action that could lead to a change in the relationship with the territories and in the geographical distribution of electoral support.

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