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# When the Local is Illiberal: Local Welfare Chauvinism and the Populist Radical Right

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## Abstract

This article contributes to the ongoing debate on populist radical-right parties in power and illiberalism, focusing on the Italian League and its welfare chauvinist agenda. It consists of ethnographic research conducted in a medium-sized city located in one of the party's electoral strongholds. During its term in municipal office, the party changed the regulation on school services (buses and canteens), requiring non-EU families to present additional documentation in order to access reduced charges. The 'canteens affair' provoked the exclusion of immigrant children from the services, a strong mobilization of local civil society, an echo in the international media and a legal dispute between a civic committee and the League's administration. Starting from this specific case, the article sheds new empirical light on the illiberal turn of Western democratic systems, understood as the progressive erosion of liberal-democratic principles of universalism and equality.

**Keywords:** populist radical right; Italian League; welfare chauvinism; local government; illiberal turn

The crisis of liberal-democratic systems has, in recent years, generated a broad and lively scientific debate (Canihac 2022; Laruelle 2022). One prominent issue raised is the growing normalization, or mainstreaming (Mudde 2016), of the so-called populist radical right (PRR). This political family's increasing access to power in various liberal-democratic contexts is having a multifaceted impact, ranging from the implementation of nativist and exclusionary policy agendas (Abts et al. 2021) to the adoption of more broadly authoritarian models (Guasti and Bustikova 2023), and to escalating tensions with the judiciary and the liberal system of checks and balances (Lacey 2019).

This article seeks to contribute to the ongoing discussion by focusing on one of the most solid and long-standing parties of the EU PRR, the Italian League. This party can be considered a 'textbook case', in terms of both its electoral success and its full institutionalization at all possible power levels.

More specifically, the article focuses on a key theme for both the study of illiberalism and of the PRR: namely, welfare chauvinism. Through ethnographic immersion,

it examines a locally based exclusionist and welfare chauvinist policy, implemented in a medium-sized town governed by the party. During its time in municipal office, the League changed the regulations for accessing school buses and canteens in primary schools. To qualify for subsidized rates, families from non-EU countries were required to provide additional documentation to prove they had no income or property abroad. This decision resulted in the exclusion of most of the non-EU children from these services, sparked widespread mobilization by a significant portion of local civil society and led to a legal case that ultimately declared the new rule illegitimate.

The article highlights three main results that may contribute to the debate on the connections between illiberalism and the PRR in power. First, it illuminates a process of progressive erosion of certain liberal-democratic cornerstones, such as universalism and equality. The data analysed here show indeed the growing normalization of a chauvinistic paradigm in Italian politics (Ambrosini et al. 2024; Bellè and Gargiulo 2024; LAW 2022).

The article then goes on to underscore the importance of the subnational level in this implementation, by confirming the strategic value of local politics as a testing arena for PRR parties (Paxton 2023).

The third element is the protective role of segments of local civil societies towards the liberal-democratic and progressive principles of equality and solidarity. Two distinctive features emerge. First, a clash between two fundamentally opposed and incompatible conceptions of citizenship: the communitarianism of the *ethnos* and the universalism of the *demos*. Second, there is frequent recourse to ‘legal mobilization’ (Avanza et al. 2022; McCann 1994; Vanhala 2011) against exclusionary policies; this in turn reflects a certain difficulty in finding political solutions to such deep value-based conflicts, without resorting to judiciary power and legal regulations.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section outlines key points in the debate on welfare and the PRR, highlighting the illiberal implications of its chauvinistic paradigm. The second focuses on the League’s pivotal role in implementing a locally based, yet multiscalar chauvinistic agenda. After discussing the research context and methodology, in the empirical analysis I connect the specific case to the broader Italian scenario. The conclusion emphasizes the potentially illiberal implications of the case, and suggests possible new research avenues.

### **The PRR, welfare and the illiberal *Gemeinschaft*: a multiscalar paradigm**

The relationship between the PRR and welfare policies has long remained relatively under-researched in the literature (Abts et al. 2021) compared to more well-established themes, such as electoral studies. More recently, attention to the topic has grown, particularly due to the accession of several PRR parties to power, which has impacted welfare agendas across many countries (Rathgeb and Busemeyer 2021).

Scholars are observing PRR parties’ convergence towards positions of welfare chauvinism (de Koster et al. 2013); this is an identity-based paradigm that ‘frames welfare provision as reserved only “for our own people” in the sense that belonging or non-belonging is based on (ethno)nationalist, othering and often racialising criteria’ (Keskinen 2016: 355).

Other works have expanded the concept of welfare chauvinism, by considering further analytical dimensions. For instance, Koen Abts et al. (2021) argue for the introduction of welfare producerism – a frame that sets makers and takers (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni 2019) of the system against each other, by advocating ‘redistributive social closure on the basis of the deservingness criteria of control, attitude and reciprocity’ (Abts et al. 2021: 23). Producerism and chauvinism are often intertwined in the PRR’s discourse, through what Koen Abts and Thierry Kochuyt (2014) define as a culturalization of producerism, which depicts immigrants as inclined to have dishonest attitudes towards the system. Both welfare chauvinism and producerism entail a horizontal dimension of conflict that refers to the social contract between contributors.

There is also a vertical dimension of the conflict, associated with the other major concept utilized in the debate: that of welfare populism (Abts et al. 2021). This is defined as an anti-elitist critical attitude towards the state elites and administrative apparatuses, aimed at stressing the malfunctioning and poor planning of welfare systems, as well as an excessive generosity towards immigrants.

Suvi Keskinen (2016) further enriches the debate by proposing the concept of welfare exclusionism; this is defined as ‘discourses and ideologies in which welfare provision is reserved only for some of those who live and work in the country, not for everyone with a residence permit’ (Keskinen 2016: 356). Hans-Georg Betz (2019) pertinently observes that welfare chauvinism is one of the three facets that constitute nativism; this comprehensive paradigm also encompasses economic nativism (prioritizing ‘natives’ in the labour market) and symbolic nativism (a supposed irremediable cultural fracture between natives and migrants). Matteo Jessoula et al. (2021) have recently introduced a further conceptual dimension, that of ‘exclusionary welfarism’; this underlines how the PRR increasingly promotes both generosity towards ‘natives’ and exclusionism against migrants. This new emphasis on welfare generosity (Jessoula et al. 2021; Jordan 2022), however, must be accompanied by a rigorous verification of actual decision-making processes. Indeed, it may serve to obscure ‘blurring positions’ (Rovny 2013; Rovny and Polk 2020) and thus avoid possible fractures among different PRR constituencies (Jordan 2022). Moreover, once PRR parties gain power, they are often oriented towards liberal chauvinism – a combination of nationalism and neoliberalism that reduces social spending and privatizes services (Falkenbach and Greer 2018).

Another common element in the PRR’s approach to welfare is a generally conservative attitude, which tends to defend traditional forms of social consumptions (above all, old-age pensions) while opposing welfare interventions towards ‘new’ potential beneficiaries outside the male breadwinner model (women, young people, precarious workers and professional figures who are typical of post-industrial economies) (Enggist and Pingerra 2021).

Besides conceptual nuances and party-related specificities, the crucial point is that the PRR’s vision of a welfare system draws lines of inclusion and exclusion that pit different social blocs against each other: young and old, high- and low-educated, women and men, natives and migrants. These boundaries refer to a core ideological element of this political family, the *Gemeinschaft*–*Gesellschaft* contraposition (Guasti and Bustikova 2023). PRR parties tend to counterpose the current globalized era with

a populist nostalgia for an imagined golden age that represents organic solidarity, as well as a nativist and reactionary social order.

The ‘good old world’ of the *Gemeinschaft* is closely linked to a growing debate in PRR studies, known as the ‘localist turn’ (Chou et al. 2022; Zapata-Barrero et al. 2017). In recent years, various contributions have highlighted the relevance of subnational analysis for understanding the electoral (Fitzgerald 2018) and organizational (Favero and Zulianello 2023) entrenchment of this political family. Moreover, localism – understood here as an ahistorical and nostalgic folklorization of local identities – constitutes a formidable ideological booster of nativism (Almeida 2019; Bellè and Faury 2024), as it allows the multiscale connection between ‘small and big homelands’.

While scholarly debate has begun to highlight the importance of the subnational dimension for studying the PRR in power, empirical studies with a local focus are still relatively scarce, although they are rapidly increasing (Bellè and Faury 2024; Paxton 2023; Paxton and Peace 2021; Peace and Paxton 2024). Nevertheless, the existing literature empirically confirms how PRR parties’ presence in local government can produce highly radical (Bellè and Faury 2024) and exclusionary policies – especially on ideologically salient issues, such as policies on refugees (Caponio and Pettrachin 2023; Pettrachin 2019, 2020) or immigrants’ access to healthcare services (Falkenbach 2022); and also in cultural terms (Almeida 2019).

My thesis here is that this localist nativism is closely linked to the so-called illiberal turn of contemporary democratic systems (for a review, see Canihac 2022; Guasti and Bustikova 2023; Laruelle 2022). The exclusion of ‘non-natives’ from the enjoyment of rights is indeed at odds with the liberal paradigm of universalism, and it challenges the liberal-democratic conception of citizenship rights.

This illiberal drive is nonetheless deeply rooted in the historical and relates precisely to the relationship between ‘natives’ and ‘non-natives’. In the early modern period, before the development of nation states, the issue of vagrancy started to be an object of regulation (Betz 2019: 118). A certain idea of the organic solidarity among a specific type of natives – the ‘racially pure’ – was then theorized in the phase of West European totalitarianism (Finchelstein 2008), when inequality became an ideological cornerstone of Nazi and fascist regimes. Thus, the PRR’s emphasis on nativism should be seen from a historical perspective, and (also) as one of the symptoms of a broader crisis of liberal democracies – after a long cycle of progressive (even if conflictual) inclusion of ‘minorities’ along the lines of sex, race and class (Mastropaolo 2023).

Moreover, this ideologization of ‘the local’ as a heartland space for natives (the *ethnos*) must be researched not only in terms of exclusionist illiberal policies, but also for its key role in producing tensions, conflict and polarization between PRR parties and progressive sectors of civil societies who mobilize against the erosion of the universalistic paradigm (the *demos*).

### **The (Northern) League’s community-based nativism: from the local to the national (and back)**

The Italian party now called the League can be considered a paradigmatic case of the communitarian and nativist model described thus far, as well as of its multiscale nature and its illiberal implications. First, the party’s position fully exemplifies the

PRR's prevalent orientation towards welfare chauvinism, blended with strong elements of welfare producerism, and is therefore linked to moral deservingness of recipients (hard-working, contributing to the country's wealth) (Landini 2021). The party's discourse also contains elements of welfare populism, as the Italian welfare system is depicted as inefficient, with its unsustainability related to the moral undeservingness of parasitic social categories (Abts et al. 2021). Recent contributions have also stressed the reactionary implications of the party's positions on welfare (Meardi and Guardiancich 2022), which reaffirm the male-breadwinner model – in line with the historical legacy of welfare familism in south European, Catholic countries (Mussino and Ortensi 2023; Scrinzi 2017).

Concerning the *Gemeinschaft* model, of particular relevance is the long federalist past of the party, which was founded in the late 1980s as a unification of various regional leagues (Barcella 2022). Significantly, the Northern League's original ideological core, before the state-wide turn promoted by the new leader Matteo Salvini from 2013 (Albertazzi et al. 2018), was marked by a producerist rhetoric that extended far beyond welfare issues, by counterposing a productive and hard-working North to a wasteful, lazy and parasitic South (Diamanti 1996). With the remarkable ideological and identity change started in 2013, designed to address a profound political, electoral and organizational crisis, the party abandoned its anti-South identity (at least formally), which further amplified its xenophobic (Barcella 2022) and reactionary tones (Bellè and Donà 2022).

Thus, from 2013 onwards, the party has amalgamated two seemingly contradictory ideological elements. On the one hand, with its long history of ethno-regionalism (Jessoula et al. 2021), it constitutes an almost ideal-typical example of localism, community-based nativism and defence of 'the territory' (Bellè 2015; Favero and Zulianello 2023). On the other hand, with the state-wide turn, the community-based sovereigntism is being ideologically stretched to a new national *Gemeinschaft*. Despite some relevant electoral successes, this new national League is also experiencing relevant tensions among long-standing grassroots militants and cadres (Bordieri 2023). Indeed, a barely concealed culture of 'Northern pride', and an agenda to favour Northern interests, are still at play (Zulianello 2021).

This ambivalence is not surprising, if we consider the long-established ethno-federalist tradition of the party. The (Northern) League has indeed governed for decades in many regions, provinces and municipalities – institutionally, socially and culturally rooting itself as 'the party of the North'. Interestingly, in its long governing experience, the party introduced widespread policies to restrict access to welfare on a local basis (Ambrosini et al. 2024; Gargiulo 2021; LAW 2022), and thus implemented an actual locally based chauvinist programme. Two criteria of exclusion were mainly used to pursue this agenda (LAW 2022): first, the number of years of residence in a given place (region, province, municipality); and second, the requirement of 'global non-possession' (*impossidenza globale*), whereby immigrants must prove that they do not own any property outside Italy (this being legally applicable only to non-EU immigrants) (Bellè and Gargiulo 2024).

This welfare chauvinist agenda has been variously implemented on a national scale, when the party was in power. A recent and significant example is the so-called

‘Citizenship Income’ (*Reddito di cittadinanza*), one of Italy’s few large-scale labour policies of the last decades to address social exclusion by supplementing low incomes. The measure was approved under the first government led by Giuseppe Conte (June 2018–September 2019), formed from the League’s unexpected alliance with the Five Star Movement.<sup>1</sup> During the tense discussion preceding the approval, the League imposed the condition that only Italian citizens had exclusive access to the benefit.

This example raises two main points related to the party’s welfare chauvinist agenda. The first is supported by recent contributions on the PRR in local government (Paxton 2023; Paxton and Peace 2021) regarding the relevance of multiscale processes of implementation, which are first tested at subnational levels and then eventually rescaled nationally. The second point is cultural. The locally based welfare chauvinism of the (Northern) League, implemented for over 30 years, proved to be crucial in establishing a ‘normalizing effect’ towards institutional racism (Better 2008). This also confirms the expansion of exclusion from one institutional level to another.

The case of Citizenship Income brings us to a last, crucial aspect in the study of the PRR’s welfare chauvinism: the illiberal implications of their agendas, and the role of legal actors and the juridical power. Despite the League’s firm exclusionist intentions, such restrictions proved to contravene several constitutional principles, as well as with various European norms (in particular, with Articles 20 and 21 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union), and with the international conventions (specifically, with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination) (Bellè and Gargiulo 2024). Consequently, when approving the decree-law, non-Italian citizens were also included.

Focusing again on the subnational level, we see similar legal constraints at play. In the last three decades, two main legal actors obstructed the party’s welfare chauvinist agenda. The Italian Constitutional Court has established an essential core of social rights pertaining to survival, which cannot be subject to census or residence-time constraints. The European Union, with its Directive 2011/98 (later confirmed by other EU juridical guidelines) (Ambrosini et al. 2024), requires member states to guarantee equal treatment to all non-EU citizens holding a permit to work. This legal frame (interestingly, itself multiscale) worked as a protection for immigrants in Italy (LAW 2022); this enabled the success of anti-discriminatory legal actions that were promoted through the years, mainly by civil society organizations and trade unions (Ambrosini et al. 2024; Bellè and Gargiulo 2024; LAW 2022).

Ultimately, the case of the League calls into question the ambivalent role of law and juridical power in relation to right-wing populism and its illiberal drives. A number of contributions have highlighted the law’s reinforcing role in the implementation of law and order agendas, through policies of criminalization, particularly against migrants (Aliverti and Bosworth 2017; Barker 2018; Strumpf 2006). Nevertheless, the literature has also highlighted an opposite, protective function (Albertazzi and Mueller 2013; Falkenbach and Greer 2018). Indeed, the liberal-democratic juridical tradition fundamentally contrasts with several core ideological traits of the PRR, such as its emphasis on leadership, disintermediation and authoritarian tendencies (Lacey 2019). Above all,

the universalistic approach to rights, despite being ideal-typical and never fully realized (Mastropaolo 2023), remains fundamentally at odds with a nativist and chauvinist approach to rights and welfare. Finally, it is significant that these multiscalar chauvinist attempts have spread over the years and have been implemented at times by centre-left administrations (Bellè and Gargiulo 2024; LAW 2022).<sup>2</sup>

## Research design and context

This article is part of a broader research project on the European PRR in local power. The focus here is on the League's arrival in power in a medium-sized town, located in a region of electoral, organizational and cultural rootedness. This town constituted the ideal context for an immersive study, as it features a good balance between an animated and varied local life, and a manageable degree of complexity, thanks to its limited size.

Two other criteria guided the selection of the case, which is anonymized here as Città.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, I was interested in focusing on an electoral and sociocultural heartland of the party; this narrowed the choice to the League's two historical strongholds: Veneto and Lombardy (Cento Bull 2009; Diamanti 1996). I opted for Lombardy, as the region has always been hegemonic in the party's internal power balance (Passarelli and Tuorto 2018). Lombardy was also the ideal context for studying Salvini's new state-wide programme. The secretary comes from the region, where he finds his most faithful political and organizational circle. Internal conflicts and tensions related to the state-wide turn (now manifest, but for a long time latent) were therefore particularly interesting to observe 'in the heart of the empire'.

Finally, Città seemed particularly interesting due to its territorial dualism. The region has been governed by the (Northern) League since the 1990s, first as a minority ally of Forza Italia, now as the main player of the same coalition (Falkenbach 2022). Furthermore, the branch is the epicentre of a lively area for the League, which holds power in all the main surrounding towns and villages. However, the town itself has been firmly in the hands of a centre-left, Catholic-inspired administration. This dual positioning in relation to institutional power proved particularly useful, as it allowed the analysis of both the party's regional mainstreaming and the impact of the access to municipal power for the local branch.

The two main research goals were the study of the party's policies and politics, and the impact of its accession on the local social fabric. For the purposes of this contribution, I will provide an in-depth analysis of a specific welfare chauvinist policy that the party implemented once in power, which provoked the mobilization of a significant portion of the local civil society. This single case can be considered emblematic both of the party's ideological core regarding migratory issues and welfare, and of the potential role of progressive civil society in mobilizing against discriminatory, illiberal policies of PRR parties.

I considered the ethnographic approach particularly suited for my research purposes, first in specific relation to the League. The state-wide turn introduced in 2013 constituted a major change in the party's identity and ideology (Albertazzi et al. 2018; Bordieri 2023; van Kessel and Albertazzi 2021; Zulianello 2021). The League is known for being a centralized and leadership-centred organization (Passarelli and Tuorto 2018; Zulianello 2021), as well as for being strongly based on grassroots activism and



territorial rooting (Bordieri 2023; Favero and Zulianello 2023). Therefore, a qualitative approach seemed appropriate for revealing the identity and ideology adjustments of northern leaders and militants, after 30 years of ethno-regionalism.

Moreover, drawing on the most classical lesson of political sociology (Sartori 1969), I aimed to focus on the intersection of the *social* and the *political*, to shed light on the party's impact on the local sociopolitical fabric. Hence, the immersive gaze provided by ethnography seemed particularly effective. The case study combines multiple data collection techniques: six months of observation of the city life (public and political events, not only of the League; electoral campaigns; cultural appointments); 20 semi-structured interviews with local party activists and leaders (most of them having prominent roles in the municipal administration during the League's mandate); and 10 interviews with members of associations and informal groups of progressive civil society, which in various ways were particularly active in the mobilization against the 'canteens affair' (a full list of the sample is available in the Supplementary Material).

Regarding party members, the sample was constructed following a relevance criterion, by choosing local leaders with major internal and/or municipal roles (often the two dimensions overlapped), and the most active grassroots militants. Concerning civil society, the focus was on entities particularly active in the local social fabric; this ensured diversity among different types of groups: formal and informal, which were connected to cultural, charitable, solidaristic activities (excluding political parties, as the focus remained on civil society).

The semi-structured interview technique – a set of predefined questions, open to digressions and follow-ups by the interviewee – allowed a combination of comparability among texts and flexibility. The interview guide for party militants/leaders focused on three areas: their personal trajectory of militancy; the relationship between the party and the territory (presence, organization, rootedness, local government); and their vision of the party's current situation and of its future developments. The guide for civil society activists also addressed three areas: their personal trajectory of activism; the characteristics and history of the group/association/NGO in relation to the context; and the impact of the party's accession and the relation established with the new administration. Although the immersive study of the PRR usually poses problems, in terms of possible hostility from the research participants (see Avanza 2008; Bellè 2016), in this case the local branch proved agreeable to my presence.

I will discuss the empirical case in the following two sections. The first will illustrate the case, as well as the mobilization process, its outcome and the interpretations provided by the party and civil society. In the second, the focus is broadened from the single case to the regional and national context.

### The canteens affair: between ideology and technicality

As had been anticipated, a few months after conquering the municipality of Città, in 2018, the new League-led administration decided to change the administrative regulations for access to reduced rates for school canteens and school buses. Non-EU immigrant families were asked to produce specific documentation that certifies assets and possessions in their countries of origin (the aforementioned 'global non-possession'



criterion of exclusion). Italian and EU families, on the other hand, simply had to present 'Isee' (Equivalent Economic Situation Indicator) documentation – the most used index to calculate provisions in the Italian welfare system.

The resolution to amend the regulation, approved over the summer, seemed inapplicable from the very beginning. In fact, the requested documentation proved to be impossible to produce in the large majority of cases, due to the numerous obstacles posed by different bureaucratic and information systems of the countries of origin. Despite the difficulties, the municipality insisted on its position; thus, in the absence of the required documentation, families were automatically obliged to pay full fees. The decision immediately prompted criticism from the opposition in the municipal council (the centre-left and Five Star Movement), and an initial mobilization animated by an immigrant association, which organized a 'children's strike'. Children affected by the measure were kept home from school for three days in protest. This initiative had echoes in the town. The main actors of the protest decided to form a committee, composed of 46 bodies, including local immigrant associations; solidarity associations, non-profit groups and cooperatives; anti-fascist organizations; national associations and NGOs active in the areas of peace, solidarity and anti-racism; political parties and local civic lists (the Democratic Party and the civic list to the left of the Democratic Party).

Media pressure on the municipality grew, including internationally (articles appeared in the *New York Times*, *Le Figaro*, *El Diario*, *Guardian*). Furthermore, the committee appointed a legal team specializing in immigrants' rights to appeal against the measure, and several demonstrations were held in the main square of the town, where the municipal hall is located. Then, the newly formed committee launched a fundraising campaign, promoted mostly through online channels (social networks of the committee, and its associated groups); it aimed to sustain the families excluded from services, and to enable them to send their children to school.

A first court ruling declared the regulation discriminatory, following analogous decisions made by other administrative courts in Italy (LAW 2022), which were in turn based on the above-mentioned juridical frame established by the Italian Constitutional Court and the EU. The municipality appealed to a second-degree tribunal (Corte d'Appello) but lost with a similar ruling (the discriminatory nature of the regulation). Following these two first defeats, the municipality abolished the new rule and decided not to continue with the court action.

The affair became a source of extreme ideological, value-based and affective polarization between the party and its opponents; this can be seen from the following interview excerpts, which highlight the clear divergence in the interpretation of facts, between the League and the civic actors mobilized against the new regulation:

I defend the principle, absolutely. I remember that at that time I was talking to a parent who said to me, 'Here my daughter doesn't pay for the canteen, she doesn't pay for transport, she doesn't pay for anything. I am a construction worker. With what I earn I am building a resort in Marrakech'. Maybe it's one case in a hundred, but this one came to talk to me. Have you no shame?! He was driving around in a Porsche. I'm talking to you about a concept of fairness. (Former regional councillor from the area of Città, League)

The situation was terrible. Some tried to go to their country of origin to produce documents. Others contacted family members and friends who are there. Very few succeeded: everything was very complicated; documents were requested that often did not even exist in the country of origin. [...] Families could not afford the costs, so they did what they could. [...] Then it was difficult to explain to the children why from one day to the next you can no longer eat in the canteen like the others, take the bus like the others. (President of an association of immigrants)

The former regional councillor, in line with the other interviews with party members, fully defends the political decision. Two classic PRR rhetorics come into play. The first is self-victimization (Scrinzi 2017), which entails self-representation as the 'native community' target of an unfair and oppressive system that favours a specific category of 'others' – in this case, immigrants. The second is welfare producerism (Abts and Kochuyt 2014), which, interestingly, in the interviewees' accounts builds upon classic liberal principles of equity and fairness. These principles are associated with a generic opposition between makers and takers of the welfare system (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni 2019), and the assumption of the moral undeservingness of welfare recipients (Abts et al. 2021) (in this case, immigrants).

On the other hand, the account from the president of the main immigrants' association that animated the protest conveys all the discomfort, confusion and anxiety experienced by the families and children affected by the measure. Without the required documentation, the price of each meal rose from 2 to 5 euros, and the three-monthly school bus fare from 90 to 210 euros. At the start of the school year, according to data provided by the press, 132 applications were submitted for the canteen service alone, of which three had documentation deemed incomplete or yet to be assessed, and 129 were refused. The data from the municipality show that in total 318 families were involved.

It was precisely to remedy the problem of children being excluded from the school environment that the committee launched the online fundraising campaign. The results were extraordinary: in about two weeks, almost 155,000 euros were raised. The funds were collected at local, national and in some cases even international scales – thanks to the extensive media coverage of the case, and the recourse to social media. Only a small portion of the funds, approximately 55,000 euros, was used to cover the expenses of the families (for the period until the first-instance ruling and the subsequent reinstatement of the previous regulation). The committee then decided to manage the remaining portion of the funds with the utmost transparency. Consequently, a call for social and cultural projects was established, managed by a local charitable foundation, to finance public initiatives aimed at promoting social inclusion, solidarity and equality.

Another interesting element in the comparison between the two opposing narratives relates to the sense-making (Pettracchin and Paxton 2022; Weick 1995) of events.<sup>4</sup> Within the local branch, the shared register is technical-bureaucratic, as a League municipal councillor testified:

In my opinion, the big mistake was a technical one, because I have Bolivian patients [the interviewee is a doctor] who told me, 'There is no cadastre there'.

Then, in that case it's clear they can't present a certificate of what they have. The new rules were wrong in this sense. (Municipal councillor, League)

The principle that guided the action is fully justified and, according to the party, the error lies entirely in the administrative translation of that principle. It is significant to notice here that these research results confirm other, recent findings on the relation between populism, the radical right and the use of the technical (Drápalová and Wegrich 2021) and/or the pragmatic register (Paxton 2023) to de-ideologize highly ideological decisions (Bellè and Faury 2024). Thus, the sense-making of the party proposes a complete shift from the political-ideological to the technical register – and, in doing so, proposes a justification of a decision that is fully in line with the party's ideology and identity.

The accounts of the committee members, on the contrary, stress precisely the value-oriented core of the mobilization.

The whole situation was a real shock. Children excluded from canteens, the concerns of families, the impossibility of a punitive regulation ... We felt personally involved. We felt an urgent need to act. There was also a sense of shame. Suddenly, our city became an international case, known as the city that excluded immigrant children from school. I believe many felt compelled to do something, to stand up against what was perceived as a true injustice and also as a violent form of racism. ... The case also helped to reunite a progressive base, especially in relation to the political sphere. Here, the entrenched power of the centre-left had created a certain distance, a sense of disaffection towards a political class that was viewed as somewhat elitist, heavily focused on managing certain key sectors and local interests, like finance and construction. In short, the case served as a reminder of what the distinctive values of the left should be. (Protest committee activist)

The activist describes an originally divided local opposition, riddled with internal tensions. Some contextual elements should be recalled here. As mentioned, the local political tradition is one of a moderate centre-left and a deeply rooted, progressive Catholic culture with a solidaristic tradition. This last element is also reflected in the lively local third sector and associative fabric. The centre-left's long continuity of power (20 years) has led to a 'nonchalant management of major economic interests', to quote one committee member, by the political power and local notables. We find, therefore, on a micro scale, several elements associated with the debate on the crisis of liberal-democratic systems, and their possible illiberal turn: growing de-ideologization; decreasing salience of the right-left cleavage; and detachment between civil society and institutions (Laruelle 2022). The canteens affair has thus succeeded in the arduous task of recompacting the political centre-left with the progressive civil society, to uphold the general principles of equality, solidarity and anti-racism.

Another relevant aspect in the conflict between the municipality and civil society is the local public administration's interstitial role. Interestingly, its role is described as crucial, yet once again with contrasting tones, by the party and the committee:

The secretary of one of the main offices of the municipality ... this one has a photo of Che Guevara, ... a woman of theirs who, on the day of the first court

ruling on the canteens [which declared the measure discriminatory], was under the town hall cutting salami and celebrating against the municipality. (Municipal councillor, League)

Interviews with the local branch of the League repeatedly highlighted the difficulty of dealing with a municipal bureaucratic apparatus run for 20 years by a centre-left coalition, as the above excerpt exemplifies. It is especially notable that the interviewed committee members, from their own perspective, confirmed this element. This highlights the important role of civil disobedience from certain key bureaucratic figures working in the municipal social services, who allowed the committee to get in touch with the families affected by the measure, to give them support and involve them in the protest.

### **The party, the town and the territory: tiles of a mosaic**

If Città appeared increasingly hostile to the party, especially due to the echo of the canteens affair, it is important to note that the surrounding area and the overall national trend seemed to respond to different political logics. The widespread presence of welfare chauvinist local policies is underlined, once again, both by the League's members and by the committee:

In [name of the town] —, which is nearby, administered by the Democratic Party, they had the identical regulation, but there they did not protest ... There are several municipalities that did the same around here, but also elsewhere. When she heard about our case, the League's mayor of Cascina [province of Pisa] said she would do the same thing. (Provincial secretary, League)

Incidentally, this idea [of differential access to local welfare and social benefits for immigrants] originated with the League and has spread to various municipalities and regions. The regions that worked on the additional documents were Friuli, where the law is still under the court's evaluation; Lombardy, which lost in court and changed it; Piedmont; Valle d'Aosta; Tuscany, a left-wing region. Tuscany, however, later voluntarily changed the law after some court rulings involving other regions. While in the south we have only Abruzzo. ... Yet, from a political point of view, the problem that the person who stays for many years in the same place has more rights than the person who has moved, has always been there. (Lawyer representing the committee in the trial against the municipality)

The case of Città is not an isolated one: several municipalities and regions have introduced similar regulations, although a systematic analysis of locally based welfare chauvinist or discriminatory policies in Italy is still lacking (for a partial review, see Ambrosini et al. 2024; LAW 2022). A particularly relevant gap is the collocation of subnational governing institutions (regions, municipalities) on the right-left spectrum. This was demonstrated by Andrea Pettrachin (2019, 2020), in relation to the different yet contiguous topic of subnational policies on asylum-seekers. In the above excerpt, the lawyer who prosecuted the case – a member of a major national association that deals with immigrants' advocacy – illustrates the League's key role over the years, in

this process of diffusion; principally in the north of the country, where the party has a solid and long-established institutional presence.

This 'contagion effect' is also confirmed in the area of Città, as stressed by the League's provincial secretary. He gives the example of a nearby town administrated by a centre-left coalition. The case followed a similar path, with the national advocacy association undertaking legal action based on the same juridical principles. In this case, however, the action remained mostly at the legal level, without the massive civic involvement seen in Città.

The lawyer's account particularly highlights the recurrence of the same political *modus operandi*:

In all the cases we have followed, the motivations [of court rulings] are always the same: you cannot differentiate treatment between citizens. ... But it is something to be studied: how is it possible that in the face of such absolute homogeneity of legal decisions, politics continues to go on? It is interesting from the point of view of the relationship between politics and justice, and from the point of view of common sense. (Lawyer representing the committee in the trial against the municipality)

In line with the few extant scholarly works on Italy (Ambrosini et al. 2024; Bellè and Gargiulo 2024; LAW 2022), the lawyer stresses the relevance of this 'low-intensity' but constant conflict between the executive/administrative and the judiciary power.

Although the engagement of local civil societies is crucial, this presents some structural limits:

Civil society plays a fundamental role, along with trade unions. Beyond our monitoring efforts, it's thanks to them that we take action. Then, a case like Città was exceptional, because there was a shift to a collective dimension, where a range of factors aligned perfectly: civil society, local centre-left politics, media attention. ... Of course, we can't reach everywhere, and where something escapes us, or where the issue is at an individual level, sometimes the injustice remains. ... You can see that centre-left administrations, especially at the local level, have some difficulties in openly taking sides on a policy of equality. There is, therefore, a political problem that relying on the law cannot permanently solve. ... It should also be considered that not everyone can afford to turn to the law, especially when there is no civic or collective support. In such cases, it is precisely the most vulnerable individuals who end up being crushed. (Lawyer representing the committee in the trial against the municipality)

Local networks of associations and trade unions (LAW 2022) seem to act as defence and advocacy 'antennas' which are more or less organized and diffuse: they range from individuals or small groups to exceptional cases, such as that of Città, in which atomized sectors of civic engagement regained cohesion and momentum with the canteens affair. Nevertheless, the lawyer stresses a crucial point that calls into question the interplay of individual and collective action, as well as the juridical and the political dimension. On the one hand, the spread of a chauvinistic agenda also seems to involve some centre-left

administrations. This finding, which certainly requires more systematic analysis, suggests that the repeated implementation of local welfare chauvinism policies may have acquired an at least partially cross-cutting character with respect to the left–right axis. On the other hand, the monitoring carried out by civil society cannot cover all cases. This leads to a differentiated impact of the legal discriminations themselves, linked to pre-existing power differentials among immigrants. Among the factors at play are certainly the levels of immigrants' social, cultural and economic capital, but also the type of sociopolitical context in which they find themselves – as illustrated by the case of Città.

### Discussion and conclusion: illiberal policies, a matter of breaking points?

The Città canteens affair mobilized two classic PRR welfare ideologies: chauvinism (de Koster et al. 2013; Ivaldi 2015; Lefkofridi and Michel 2017) (excluding eligibility on the basis of identity criteria) and producerism (opposing 'makers and takers' of the system) (Landini 2021). In particular, the legitimacy of access to subsidized rates was found to be based on the criteria of control and reciprocity; this constructs foreigners as morally undeserving, as parasitic 'takers' of the system (Abts et al. 2021), according to another classic PRR ideological frame.

While the case under analysis thus supports existing literature on the PRR and welfare, it also illuminates some major blind spots in the debate. First is the importance of subnational levels in the analysis of PRR governing actions (Bellè and Fauray 2024; Paxton 2023; Paxton and Peace 2021; Peace and Paxton 2024). The controversy analysed here – and, more broadly, the League's role in producing locally based welfare exclusionist policies – suggests that the national level of analysis alone is not enough to understand the phenomenon, and its consequences in terms of democratic erosion.

The processes of decentralization and rescaling that have marked the political development of Western nation states in recent decades (Le Galès 2021) also pose the question of how the PRR's arrival in local power may lead to the nationalization of locally based welfare policies (Falkenbach 2022). From this perspective, the local proves to be a relevant 'testing arena' for ideologically driven, illiberal policies (Bellè and Fauray 2024) that can be rescaled nationally after being legitimized on a smaller scale (Paxton 2023; Peace and Paxton 2023). Alongside this broader consideration, the case of the League may be useful for the study of other PRR formations in local power, which operate in federal systems, or in contexts with a strong degree of subnational political autonomy (as exemplified today by Alternative für Deutschland).

The case of Città presents several illiberal elements that occur in an otherwise liberal frame (Canihac 2022). First, we are faced here with an openly discriminatory policy that produces forms of institutional racism (Better 2008). The main illiberal result of this approach is the replacement of classic liberal principles of universalism and equality – the *demos* – with the exclusionist belonging of the *ethnos*.

The canteens affair also highlights illiberal implications concerning the modalities in which it unfolded. The party's rhetoric in justifying its action combines two apparently contrasting registers. The first is the technical-administrative: the League systematically insists on the technical nature of the rule, focusing only on its bureaucratic errors in handling it. However, the action is claimed precisely in the name of

the liberal principle of justice and equality among Italians and immigrants. The ‘technicalization’ of an eminently political act (Bellè and Faury 2024), together with the use of a liberal rhetoric, are at odds with the municipal decision’s severe consequences for the targeted families and children. Here we see at play a discursive, post-truth (McIntyre 2018) shift that blurs the boundaries between the effective practice (institutional racism) and the rhetoric used to narrate it (equality, justice, self-victimization). In this regard, there is, in my opinion, a dual illiberal implication. On one hand, there is that of the political agenda itself. The other concerns the discursive framework through which it is presented. The denial of the ideological content contributes to weakening the liberal-democratic frame on a cultural level, through a process of semantic falsification that – if systematically reproduced on a large scale – can undermine the cultural collective sense-making of certain fundamental democratic principles, such as equality.

A further consideration regarding the illiberal implications of the case is linked to what I would call a ‘paradox of the un/political’. In the case of Città, but also in others that are less blatant in terms of civic participation (LAW 2022), progressive civil society succeeded in mobilizing mainly through legal action. The role played by the judicial element can be linked to the debate on cause lawyering (Israël 2001; Sarat and Scheingold 2006) and legal mobilizations (McCann 1994; Vanhala 2011). This mobilization frame is increasingly diffuse (Avanza et al. 2022), due to the combined effect of the rise in illiberal policies that erode fundamental legal principles (especially regarding the protection of minority rights) (Kalberer 2021), the general growth in repressive measures against social movements (Ellefsen and Jämte 2023; Mastropaolo 2023) and the growing detachment of institutional politics from civil society (Della Porta 2020; Laruelle 2022).

In this regard, a relevant sub-topic that emerged from the research, which is attracting growing scholarly attention, is the role of administrative apparatuses in the face of democratic erosion – especially when PRR parties arrive in power (Bauer 2023; Bauer and Becker 2020). As confirmed by the analysed case, public administrations today represent hybrid areas which face a sort of double bind. They often constitute spaces of more or less formalized resistance to democratic erosion, while also being possible targets/allies of illiberal drives (Bauer 2023).

Another aspect to highlight is a certain ‘ideological cross-cuttingness’ of the welfare chauvinism paradigm: specifically, the adoption of similar agendas by centre-left coalitions, or at least a lack of opposition towards the spreading of discriminatory agendas and the violation of democratic principles. This is a crucial point that requires further empirical investigation, as available studies usually do not focus on the political orientation of the administrations implementing such policies (Ambrosini et al. 2024; LAW 2022). This cross-cuttingness, if confirmed on a broader scale, would require a rethinking of the analytical categories that sometimes divide party families too rigidly, by associating racist welfare policies only with PRR parties.

Ultimately, regardless of the degree of transversality of the exclusionary paradigm along the left–right axis, the case analysed here, along with the available literature, confirms the pervasiveness and the ‘obstinate resistance’ (Ambrosini et al. 2024) of Italian regional and municipal administrations in reproducing institutional racism; even in spite of civic mobilizations, legal proceedings and sanctions (Bellè and Gargiulo 2024; LAW 2022). This in turn calls into question the resilience of liberal democracy as a



whole, by highlighting a growing fragility of some of its core principles, such as equality and universalism; and by interrogating the relationship between liberal-democratic systems, neoliberal globalization processes and migration phenomena. If the world consists of people who move around and will increasingly do so, how can welfare systems be reconfigured while safeguarding the principle of universalism? And if the rise of global inequalities, climate change and precarious working conditions increasingly impose mobility on individuals, how can equality be guaranteed in the face of policies that seek to limit rights to a permanent presence in a given territory? In addition, more broadly: to what extent is a set of illiberal acts sustainable in a democratic system (Canihac 2022)? If institutional racism multiplies at various territorial levels, and if the forms of limiting these policies seem to be external to party politics – mainly relating to judicial power and legal actions – then what is the breaking point in this cumulative process of illiberal advance?

I propose that an effective analytical perspective on these complex problems is that of equality. The specific case analysed shows us how the crisis of liberal democracies can be seen as a crisis in ensuring equality between individuals and social groups, both in formal and substantive terms. In this sense, I believe that a comparative and multilevel research agenda must be developed, focusing on the exclusionary and discriminatory policies of the PRR, their impact on society and their cultural and political pervasiveness.

**Supplementary material.** The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2025.14>.

**Data availability.** Due to the qualitative nature of the research, and in accordance with the advice of the Ethics Committee of the host institution, research data are not available, as they would compromise the non-recognisability and privacy standards of the research.

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**Ethics statement.** The article meets the EU and national legal and ethical requirements of the countries where the task of raising ethical issues is carried out. I am also aware that data protection is a fundamental right, guaranteed by European law and enshrined in Article 8 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. In consideration of both these legal obligations, and my deontological duties as researcher, I declare that the protection of the physical and moral integrity of individuals involved in the research has been respected at every stage of the research. The data presented have been pseudonymized (including geographical locations). The research was approved by the ethics committees of my host institution (Sciences Po Paris), approval number 2021-019.

## Notes

**1** Decree-Law of 28 January 2019, No. 4, converted into Law No. 26 of 28 March 2019.

**2** To date, to my knowledge, there is a lack of systematic studies on legal and institutional discrimination at the subnational level, except for the 2022 *Leverage the Access to Welfare (LAW)* report, and the subsequent work by Ambrosini et al. (2024). However, these valuable contributions do not address the political alignment of the institutions responsible for discriminatory laws or regulations. Nevertheless, an exemplary

case of institutional discrimination was carried out by the Tuscany region, a historical stronghold of the centre-left, that introduced in its public housing law (No. 2 of 2019) a requirement of five years of residence within the municipality issuing the call. Subsequent to a series of protests and interventions by civil society organizations and trade unions, the regional government opted to remove the clause. Nevertheless, the law still includes a preferential point system based on the length of residence or employment within the region.

3 The pseudonymization protocol is subject to the ethical approval procedure of the institution that hosted the research. The established protocol included the name of the town. In the excerpts in the next sections the interviewees also remain anonymous.

4 Sense-making is a key concept in the social sciences, developed particularly in the sociology of organizations (Weick 1995). It can be defined as the process through which individuals, within organizational contexts, make sense of ambiguous or uncertain experiences, fill knowledge gaps, make decisions in uncertain situations and manage traumatic or unexpected events. For its application in the political field, see the contribution by Pettrachin and Paxton (2022) on the management of the refugee crisis by mayors from the League and the Five Star Movement.

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