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CASE STUDY

REVISED EUPopLink Country Report – Italy

[version 2; peer review: 4 approved]

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Abstract

Italy has often been described as a 'laboratory of populism', however, its Eurosceptic turn is more recent. This country report, prepared as part of the EUPopLink COST Action, traces the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism in the Italian party system. It introduces the main populist and Eurosceptic actors in Italy, and considers the nexus between populism and Euroscepticism in the Italian context. It also considers mainstream responses to the rise of populist euroscepticism.

Keywords

Italy; Populism; Euroscepticism; European Union, Europe

This article is included in the COST Actions gateway.

This article is included in the Linking Euroscepticism and Populism (EUPopLink) collection.

Open Peer Review

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

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REVISED **Amendments from Version 1**

The new version of the text incorporates reviewer feedback. Changes were made primarily in the concluding paragraph of section 3 and in the conclusion. Additional references were included in sections 1, 2 and 3.

Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article

1. Introduction

Italy has often been described as a 'laboratory of populism', however, its Eurosceptic turn is more recent. Until the mid-1990s, both public and party-based Euroscepticism remained marginal phenomena (Isernia, 2008; Roux & Verzichelli, 2010). At the party level, Euroscepticism was virtually absent until the mid-90s. From 1994 onwards, moderate Euroscepticism was expressed by Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and the post-fascist Alleanza Nazionale. Around the same time, the (at the time) ethno-regionalist Lega Nord also adopted an anti-EU position. Since then, Eurosceptic positions have hardened and become more diffuse, particularly amongst populist actors. At the level of electorates, Italian citizens shifted from being amongst the most enthusiastic supporters of the EU to some of its staunchest critics. Whereas in the early 1990s, support for the EU was overwhelmingly high (Eurobarometer data put it at around 80% - see Conti et al., 2020), it steadily declined only to drop strongly at the end of the 2000s. By 2011, only 41% of Italians thought that membership of the EU was a good thing (Conti et al., 2020).

A key trigger for Italy's Eurosceptic turn was the Eurozone crisis and its management, which brought the EU front and centre in public debate. The successive crises have contributed to keeping the EU a salient issue. Italy was at the forefront of responding to the so-called migration crisis and was hard-hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. As one of the EU's largest member states, it also plays an important (if secondary compared to some of its EU counterparts) role in supporting Ukraine in its war against Russia. Although support for the EU has recovered some terrain since the Eurocrisis, it remains far from the heights of the early 1990s, and party-based Euroscepticism is now well entrenched.

This country report traces the links between party-based populism and Euroscepticims in Italy. It was prepared as part of the EUPopLink COST Action (Andreadis & Vasilopoulou, 2026) following the EUPopLink Theoretical Framework and Guidelines (Lorimer et al., 2026; EUPopLink, n.d.).

2. Populist political actors

There are several populist party actors in Italy and most of them are also Eurosceptic. Going from right to left, the main populist actors are:

- **Lega (League, formerly Lega Nord, populist radical right).** The Lega Nord started off as a union of autonomist movements representing the regions of the Italian north. Founded by Umberto Bossi in 1991, the party sought to obtain more autonomous decision-making powers for 'the people' in the northern Italian regions, against a 'thieving' Rome-centric 'elite'. In 2013, the Lega elected a new leader, Matteo Salvini. Salvini has shifted the ideological profile of the party in nationalist, populist radical right direction (Albertazzi et al., 2018). Its populist framework now centres opposition to EU elites rather than Italian elites. The Lega has been in government several times, and is part of Italy's governing coalition since 2022. It has developed strong links with populist radical right parties in the EU and sits in the sovereigntist Patriots for Europe group in the European Parliament.

- **Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI, populist radical right).** Officially founded in 2012 from a splinter of the right-wing coalition People of Freedom, FdI is a 'rooted newcomer' (Baldini et al., 2023): it is the successor of the conservative Alleanza Nazionale, itself the successor of the neofascist Movimento Sociale Italiano. Following a few years of political irrelevance, the party experienced a surge in popularity since 2019 due to the weakening of the Lega's support and its role as sole official opposition party to Mario Draghi's government. Giorgia Meloni, the party leader, is currently the head of a coalition government with the Lega and Forza Italia. FdI combines a broadly liberal economic agenda with nativist positions on immigration and a propensity for law-and-order policies. It is a leading member of the European Conservatives and Reformist group in the European Parliament.

- **Forza Italia (Go Italy, borderline case).** Forza Italia was founded in 1993 by late media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi and can be classified, at least under his leadership, as an economically liberal, right-wing populist party (Bobba & McDonnell, 2016; Mudde, 2007; Verbeek & Zaslove, 2016). It fits none of the three categories (left-wing populist, populist radical right, valence populist) used in this study. The qualifier of populism mainly speaks to Berlusconi's style of politics. A former entrepreneur, he positioned himself as an outsider and displayed an 'anti-political' stance. Forza Italia was also extremely leader-centric, and promoted full frontal attacks against liberal-democratic institutions (Albertazzi & Mueller, 2013). Forza Italia has led government several times and until the early 2010s, it was the dominant force in the Italian right. Since Berlusconi's retreat from politics, it has lost its hold on the Italian centre-right and moderated its populism. Forza Italia is a member of the European People's Party and is well-integrated into the EU's structures.

- **Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five Star Movement, M5S, valence populist party, sometimes left-wing populist).** It was founded in 2009 by comedian Beppe Grillo but became electorally successful in the years between 2013 and 2018. In 2018, it succeeded in forming a government first with the Lega and then with the centre-left Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD). Since 2018, it has experienced a steep decline in popularity although it is still electorally successful in Southern Italy (Garzia, 2023). Its main agenda centres on a mix of anti-establishment claims and broadly progressive socio-economic policies. The M5S has been less successful than its populist radical right counterparts in establishing transnational collaborations with like-minded parties and currently sits with The Left Group.

3. Positions on 'Europe' and the Populism-Euroscepticism nexus

The Lega, FdI and the M5S are the main populist Eurosceptic actors in the Italian context. Although Forza Italia has expressed Eurosceptic positions in the past, it has shifted into progressively more pro-EU territory (Biancalana et al., 2024), leading to its exclusion from the current analysis. Other smaller party actors and groups express consistently populist and sovereigntist Eurosceptic positions (e.g., parties such as Italexit or Democrazia Sovrana Popolare), however, they have remained electorally unsuccessful. The centre and the Left, for their part, remain mostly pro-European.

The Lega is the most consistently Eurosceptic of the three populist Eurosceptic parties. Although not opposed to the principle of European collaboration, it is both opposed to the current practice of European integration and to extending it to new areas. It opposes both polity and policy aspects of the European Union. In polity terms, in the 2024 EU elections, it ran with the slogan 'More Italy, less Europe', a position that well-reflects its scepticism not just of future integration, but also of the current structures of the EU. This position is consistent with those it defended in previous years. In terms of policies, like the M5S, it toyed with the idea of having a referendum on the Euro (although it abandoned this commitment) and generally expressed strong criticism against EU governance in the areas of economics and migration. In line with its radical right profile, the Lega has strongly opposed the Schengen area and advocated for breaking EU rules on migration. It has also developed a populist critique of EU institutions (especially the Commission) as overly bureaucratic, detached from citizens and against 'common sense'. Its posters for the 2024 EU election are instructive of the kind of policy aspects the party picks up: they include the 'more Italy, less Europe' mentioned above, but also a commitment to defend made in Italy by 'stopping artificial meat and insects', and stopping 'green Euro-follies', 'Islamic extremism' and 'sending Italian soldiers to fight in Ukraine'. Overall, the Lega's critique of the EU is in line with its populist radical right profile. As could be expected by a nativist party, it views the EU as a threat to the identity, sovereignty and economic well-being of the Italian nation. At the same time, it also articulates its opposition in populist terms, identifying EU elites as enemies of the Italian people.

If the Lega has been quite consistent in its positions, FdI has shifted its views since it was founded. Although it remains Eurosceptic, it has moved from stark opposition to the EU to a more constructive approach. In the first EU election in which it took part, FdI advocated for a dissolution of the Eurozone or for Italy to leave the Eurozone, as well as for suspending Italy's participation in EU economic policies such as the Fiscal Compact, European Stability Mechanism, and Stability and Growth Pact. It also critiqued European bureaucracy and 'Eurowaste', while demanding more collaboration in matters of migration. In line with its populist radical right profile, it also advocated for the protection of Europe's Christian roots and the value of life, individuals and the family. The 2019 euromanifesto amped up the polity critique, opening on the need to reform the EU in the direction of a European confederation of sovereign states. The manifesto opposed the EU in populist and nationalist terms, critiquing Eurocrats and technocrats, while centring the need to protect Italy's national interests. It also included elements of policy critique, particularly in its opposition to austerity and the Euro. Many of the policies, however, have more to do with domestic priorities and do not seem to have an EU angle to how to implement them. Since taking over government responsibilities in 2022, FdI has moderated its opposition. It adopted a 'Euro-realist' approach of engaging with the EU institutions in various policy areas, while remaining critical of certain polity-aspects and particularly of the EU's effects on national sovereignty. It also, however, insists more on the

notion of changing the institutions from within and shifting the EU towards its own priorities. Its approach, as presented in the manifesto, is to demand that the EU 'do less, but better'. In this sense, while it expresses some polity-scepticism, particularly when advocating for a confederal form of European integration that will 'respect the principles of proportionality and subsidiarity' (Fratelli d'Italia, 2024), it does not oppose EU collaboration per se and considers the EU should focus on the 'great questions of our times' (such as foreign policy). Its programme reflects its broad populist radical right priorities (including a focus on food sovereignty, pro-natality policies, opposition to green policies and migration), but with some reference to liberal economic policies and individual freedoms. In general, the nativist frame dominates over the populist one in the expression of Euroscepticism. EU institutions are occasionally criticised for being bureaucratic and unelected, but the frame of 'people' versus 'elites' is not explicitly used. Rather, the focus is on Italy's identity and national interest in the EU construction.

The Movimento Cinque Stelle, like FdI, has also shifted positions over the years. The M5S has never fully opposed the principle of EU integration, although it has often expressed scepticism about the practice and, to a lesser extent, future of the EU. In its early years, it adopted both policy and polity Euroscepticism and was amongst the staunchest critics of EU integration, particularly in virtue of a strong 'no Euro' current within the party. In its 2014 EU election manifesto, although it did not advocate leaving the EU, it opposed austerity policies, proposed a referendum on the Euro and suggested a reform of the EU's architecture. By 2019, its positions had mellowed. Although it still opposed EU-imposed austerity measures, it no longer advocated for Italy to leave the Euro and broadly accepted Italy's membership of the EU. It also sought to 'upload' some of its domestic policies to the EU level – e.g., by advocating for an EU minimum wage. By the 2024 elections, while it remained critical of several EU policies (e.g., austerity measures) and to some extent of the EU's current institutional architecture (suggesting, amongst other things, to reform the treaties in a more democratic direction), its critiques were broadly inserted into a framework of reforming the EU and pursuing more ambitious integration in certain areas (such as socio-economic rights, green policies or European identity). Massetti (2023) defines the M5S's profile as a 'critically Europhile' one. When the EU is criticised, it is often done in populist terms. The European 'establishment' is attacked for being in cahoots with big financial interests, at the expense of European citizens. Parties in Europe are accused of colluding with one another to pursue their interests instead of doing what is good for citizens. In line with its early 'valence populist' agenda, the M5S also includes references to some of its core anti-corruption values as well as to direct democracy in its European programmes. These populist frames, it should be noted, have been toned down in recent years, and the 2024 EU election programme is significantly less populist in content than previous programmes.

As noted above, many of Italy's populist Eurosceptic parties have changed position over time. It is hard to ascribe this to a response to any one of the EU's most recent crises, however, crises did have an impact on some of these changes (Braun et al., 2019). Brexit did not generate much debate, and most of them had, at most, advocated for leaving the Eurozone rather than the EU so it did not become an inspiration (or cautionary tale, for that matter). The Covid crisis did generate some movement (Capati et al., 2024), especially for the M5S. Its shift to more pro-EU positions can be understood both as the result of taking on governing responsibilities, and as a response to the EU's shift in priorities following the pandemic. The arrival of large amounts of EU funding to Italy countered the party's narrative of the EU as an agent of austerity and prompted them to shift to a line more supportive of a 'social' Europe. The war in Ukraine was fitted into the parties' agendas, but in different directions (see Capati & Trastulli, 2025 for a more extensive discussion). The M5S primarily started defending 'peace' and opposing further EU action. FdI took a pro-Ukraine stance and participated actively in EU efforts in the area. The Lega adopted a more ambivalent stance. It has declared its support for Ukraine, but also tried to limit European and particularly Italian involvement in the conflict and sought to undermine governmental action in this area. Finally, Trump's election has generated enthusiasm in the Lega, but put FdI in a difficult position. While Giorgia Meloni initially had good relations with Trump, these have soured over the second year of his presidency.

4. Responses to Euroscepticism and consequences

When it comes to the political mainstream, Italy is a rather unique case in that its political spectrum is dominated by populist actors. It is therefore hard to identify a clear 'mainstream' that populist Eurosceptics might be opposing, and much of the competition over Europe has happened within the populist party family. The main, non-populist mainstream party is the centre-left PD. The PD is broadly pro-EU and has generally taken an adversarial stance to populist Euroscepticism (Fifi, 2025). Forza Italia has been generally quite ambivalent towards European integration, adopting both accommodative and adversarial stances. In recent years, the latter have dominated, with Forza Italia adopting an increasingly pro-EU profile. This can be seen as part of an attempt to craft a more distinctive position vis-à-vis its right-wing competitors. Italy also has a wide array of smaller centrist and broadly pro-EU parties (e.g., Italia Viva, Azione, Europa+) whose positions could be classed as adversarial.

In terms of the concrete implications of the growth of party-based Euroscepticism, they remain quite limited. The EU question has certainly been politicised in Italy. Several parties have expressed diverging positions on the EU, used it political competition (Capati, 2025), and Italy's public opinion is now more Eurosceptic than in the past. However, this has not had significant political repercussions. For much of the period since the Eurozone crisis began, Italy was governed by Europhile governments and when in government, even the EU's staunchest critics have failed to produce concrete changes in policy direction. This was blatantly visible when the M5S – Lega coalition government sought to negotiate the conditions of Italy's 2019 budget with the Commission, and failed to obtain any concessions. These difficulties in reforming the EU are partially due to the structural issues faced by Italian parties wishing to push EU policy in new directions. Reforming the EU is notoriously difficult, and even more so for a Eurozone country with a weak economy. Italy needs continued support from the European Union to maintain trust from investors, meaning it has little leeway in negotiating conditions such as those demanded by populist Eurosceptic actors. Italy has also, over the last decade of crises, often demanded solidarity from its EU neighbours, be it in the context of the migration crisis or the Covid-19 crisis. Overall, although Italian populist Eurosceptic leaders have in the past been able to slow down or challenge EU processes (see e.g., Zaun and Ripoll Servent, 2023), they have had a marginal impact overall.

Perhaps more interestingly, Italian populist Eurosceptic parities have been best able to affect EU politics when they moderated their stances in their dealings with the EU. Giorgia Meloni is a case in point. By adopting a constructive attitude towards Ukraine and developing links with the European Commission's president Ursula von der Leyen, she has been able to shape some of the EU's thinking around migration. Although her influence on the institutions is often overstated (as she herself discovered when seeking to gain influence for ECR in the von der Leyen Commission), she is certainly less ostracised than her populist predecessors.

5. Short conclusion

The landscape of populism and Euroscepticism in Italy is rich. As the report has shown, populist Euroscepticism is widespread in Italy, but it presents itself in various iterations. On the right, two different populist radical right parties present Eurosceptic positions, but they vary in the degree of opposition to the EU they display. The M5S, for its part, presents a clear populist profile, but has shifted in terms of its position towards the European Union. Even though there is variation in the degrees of euroscepticism expressed by populist parties in Italy, they all broadly accept the principle of EU integration while critiquing its current practice and its future (Vasilopoulou, 2018). They also all adopt both 'polity' and 'policy' scepticism (Mair, 2007), but their opposition can be classed primarily as 'soft' rather than 'hard' (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2008). Importantly, the analysis above has shown that Euroscepticism is far from being a static feature of political parties, indicating the need for further research to explain how and why populist parties change their views.

Overall, however, while populist Euroscepticism is well-represented in Italy, it has not had a strong effect in terms of Italy's policies towards the EU, partially due to the dominance of Europhiles for much of the last decade and because of the moderating effect that government has had on some populist actors. This suggests that although Euroscepticism is an ideological feature that populist parties embrace, they do not necessarily follow through with their anti-EU agenda, or even stick to it over the long term. There may, in this sense, be a gap between Eurosceptic rhetoric and Eurosceptic practice that is worth exploring further.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability statement

No data are associated with this article.

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Version 2

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✔ **Nika Gigauri**
GIPA – Georgian Institute of Public Affairs, Tbilisi, Georgia

Thank you for addressing the recommendations. The updated version effectively incorporates the theoretical framework, and I am happy to endorse this final draft.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Political Science, Party Politics, Populism, and Euroscepticism.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 04 June 2026

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✔ **Andrea Capati**
Luiss University, Rome, Italy

All comments have been satisfactorily addressed and the article is ready for indexing.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: European integration, party competition, EU economic governance, EU financial assistance, EU crises

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Version 1

Reviewer Report 29 May 2026

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Antonella Seddone
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This country report offers a well-structured account of the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism in the Italian party system. The reconstruction of party trajectories across multiple electoral cycles is careful and nuanced, and the report succeeds in capturing the considerable variation among populist actors, both in the degree of their opposition to the EU and in the direction of their evolution over time.
Three observations may help strengthen the contribution.
The report would benefit from a brief engagement with the literature on the shift from permissive consensus to constrained dissensus in European integration. This framing matters for the Italian case because it helps explain why Euroscepticism became electorally viable when it did, not as a linear outgrowth of pre-existing ideological commitments, but as a consequence of the politicisation of the EU issue in a context where public opinion had previously been largely indifferent. The Eurozone crisis accelerated a process of EU politicisation already underway, converting a gradual erosion of diffuse public support into an explicit axis of party competition. The literature on the shift from permissive consensus to constrained dissensus captures this dynamic well, framing politicisation not as a sudden rupture but as the cumulative outcome of rising EU visibility and contestation over a longer arc.
A related gap concerns the domestic political environment that made anti-elite rhetoric so resonant in Italy before the EU became a salient target. The report traces the emergence of Eurosceptic positions among populist actors but does not fully account for the cultural and historical substrate in which those positions took root. The collapse of the First Republic following the Tangentopoli investigations of the early 1990s left a lasting imprint on Italian political culture, consolidating a widespread disposition toward anti-establishment politics that predated, and in important ways facilitated, the subsequent uptake of Eurosceptic frames. The trajectory of the Lega is instructive in this regard. Its original anti-elite mobilisation targeted the Italian state, Rome, and what its rhetoric cast as the southern-subsidised political class. The pivot toward the EU as the primary antagonist came later, at the point when that domestic target had been substantially exhausted as a resource for political differentiation. Reading the Lega's Euroscepticism as a relocation of the anti-elite frame, rather than an independent ideological

commitment, has implications for how we interpret the stability and coherence of such positions over time, and would add analytical depth to what is already a perceptive account of the party's evolution.
A third observation follows directly from the preceding one and concerns the mechanisms behind party-level moderation. The report documents with care the softening of Eurosceptic positions in the cases of FdI and M5S following their entry into government, but stops short of providing an explicit account of why this occurs. The structural logic behind the empirical pattern deserves to be spelled out, because it bears directly on the broader question of whether Euroscepticism functions as ideological conviction or as political strategy. Challenger parties operate under a fundamentally different opportunity structure than governing parties. Eurosceptic claims carry low cost and high electoral salience when made from opposition, but become structurally constrained once in office, given bond market pressures, dependence on EU transfers, and the reputational requirements of international credibility. FdI's shift toward what the report aptly calls a Euro-realist posture is, on this reading, less a moderation of underlying preferences than an adaptation to an altered set of incentives and constraints. Making this mechanism explicit would strengthen the report's contribution to the broader debate on populist parties in government and would also provide a more satisfying account of why Eurosceptic rhetoric and Eurosceptic practice so frequently diverge, the gap the report identifies in its conclusion but does not fully explain.
These are suggestions for deepening an already solid contribution. The report succeeds in its primary aim of mapping the populism-Euroscepticism nexus in a complex and consequential case, and the empirical material is handled with appropriate care and discrimination.

Is the background of the case's history and progression described in sufficient detail?
Yes

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
No source data required

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Is the case presented with sufficient detail to be useful for teaching or other practitioners?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Political Science, Political parties, Public opinion, Political Communication

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 12 May 2026

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The article offers a concise overview of the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism in contemporary Italy. It reconstructs the evolution of party-based Euroscepticism from the 1990s to the present and examines how different populist actors – namely Lega, Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), Forza Italia (FI), and Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) – have articulated distinct forms of opposition to European integration, thereby contributing to the rise of populist Euroscepticism.
One of the principal strengths of the article lies in its ability to synthesize a broad and complex political trajectory within a relatively concise format. The historical contextualization is particularly effective: the author demonstrates how Italy evolved from one of the most Europhile Member States into a political environment in which Eurosceptic narratives became increasingly normalized following the Eurozone crisis. The discussion of successive crises – including migration, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine – adds further analytical depth by situating Italian developments within broader European dynamics.
The sections devoted to the main party actors are among the strongest parts of the article. The reconstruction of the ideological evolution of Lega, FdI, FI, and M5S is nuanced and balanced, avoiding simplistic categorizations. In particular, the analysis effectively captures the distinction between nationalist-populist Euroscepticism and more fluid, issue-based forms of Euroscepticism. The article also succeeds in illustrating how participation in government has moderated certain anti-EU positions, especially in the cases of FdI and M5S. This represents an important contribution to the broader scholarly debate concerning the strategic adaptability of populist actors once in government.
At the same time, several aspects of the article could be further strengthened. First, although the article repeatedly refers to the distinction between polity and policy-based Euroscepticism, these conceptual categories could be defined more explicitly at the outset and applied more systematically throughout the analysis. Moreover, the article could engage more directly with the theoretical implications of the transformations described, particularly in relation to FdI and M5S, whose trajectories suggest that Euroscepticism is neither static nor ideologically uniform. The moderation of FdI following its entry into government and the gradual shift of M5S toward a more “critical Europhile” position deserve more explicit theorization in relation to debates on party institutionalization, strategic adaptation, and the constraints imposed by both national and supranational governance structures.
A further aspect that remains somewhat underdeveloped concerns the level of public understanding of the European Union (EU) within the Italian context. While the article convincingly reconstructs party-based Eurosceptic narratives, it devotes comparatively less attention to the broader social and cognitive environment in which such narratives gain electoral resonance. In particular, the article could benefit from a more explicit discussion of the widespread uncertainty

surrounding the actual functioning of EU institutions, the relationship between European law and the Italian constitutional order, and the concrete impact of EU decision-making on Italy's economic, social, and financial governance. Issues concerning the primacy of EU law, direct effect, and the interaction between national and supranational competences remain largely absent from public debate, despite their central relevance for understanding both support for and opposition to European integration.

This omission is analytically significant because the nexus between populism and Euroscepticism often appears to rely on highly simplified, if not distorted, representations of the European Union. In many cases, the EU becomes a flexible political construct onto which national actors project contradictory expectations and frustrations. Parties commonly labelled as populist frequently invoke the need for both "more Europe" and "less Europe" depending on the issue area and policy field involved, irrespective of the EU's actual competences and institutional functions in those domains or, more broadly, of the role played by Member States in governing them. At the same time, these actors often oppose the institutional and sovereignty transfers that would be necessary to implement genuinely supranational solutions. In other words, they criticize the EU for allegedly undermining national identity and sovereignty, yet continue to appeal to European institutions whenever national governments prove incapable of addressing sensitive issues such as migration crises, economic instability, or geopolitical insecurity. In this sense, the EU frequently functions as a convenient scapegoat for domestic political failures, particularly in contexts where public knowledge of EU institutional mechanisms remains limited.

The contemporary Italian debate offers several illustrations of this ambiguity. Recent statements by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni advocating a "new political Europe" while simultaneously rejecting further transfers of sovereignty exemplify a broader contradiction that characterizes not only populist radical-right actors but also ostensibly pro-European forces. Calls for a stronger and more strategic Europe are often disconnected from the institutional reforms that such ambitions would necessarily require. This tension is particularly visible in areas such as foreign policy, defence, migration governance, technological regulation, and economic coordination, where Member States continue to resist deeper integration while simultaneously criticizing the EU's perceived inefficiency. The result is a recurrent oscillation between Europhile and sovereignist discourses, which helps explain both the ideological flexibility and strategic repositioning of parties such as Lega and Fratelli d'Italia and the ambiguities of formally pro-European actors such as M5S and the Partito Democratico (PD). Indeed, these parties and their leaders often appear to embody what might be described as an "identity of contradictions": they are pro-European yet also moderately sovereignist; they reject nationalism while simultaneously defending the notion of a "Europe of nations"; they criticize the fragmentation of the EU in matters of foreign policy, security, and defence, yet rarely explain how a common European army, integrated police cooperation, or a unified foreign policy could realistically be established.

These observations, however, do not detract from the overall quality of the article. The article offers a valuable contribution both to specialists working on Italy and to scholars interested more broadly in comparative populism and European integration.

Is the background of the case's history and progression described in sufficient detail?

Yes

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?

Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Partly

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Is the case presented with sufficient detail to be useful for teaching or other practitioners?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Constitutional Law and EU Law

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Author Response 18 May 2026

Marta Lorimer

Thank you for your positive evaluation of the country report on Italy and for the detailed and constructive feedback provided. Below, I detail how I amended the report in response to the recommendations made.

Clarifying the conceptual categories *'First, although the article repeatedly refers to the distinction between polity and policy-based Euroscepticism, these conceptual categories could be defined more explicitly at the outset and applied more systematically throughout the analysis.'*

- **Response:** Thank you for this suggestion. The present report was prepared as part of the EUPopLink COST Action (Andreadis and Vasilopoulou, 2026) following the EUPopLink Theoretical Framework and guidelines (Lorimer et al., 2026). In the interest of keeping the reports concise and consistent, the full definition of all conceptual categories is provided in the guidelines (available here: https://www.eupoplink.eu/node/17 and in Lorimer et al. 2026) and not repeated in individual country reports, as this would take away space from the empirical account that is central to the country case studies. To clarify this further, I have added a link to the guidelines at the beginning of the report. I have also sought to link the findings back to the conceptual categories in the conclusion (a point raised by Reviewer 1 as well).

Considering further the theoretical implications of the study *'Moreover, the article could engage more directly with the theoretical implications of the transformations described, particularly in relation to FdI and M5S, whose trajectories suggest that Euroscepticism is neither static nor ideologically uniform. The moderation of FdI following its entry into government and the gradual shift of M5S toward a more "critical Europhile" position deserve more explicit theorization in relation to debates on party institutionalization, strategic adaptation, and the constraints imposed by both national and supranational governance structures.'*

- **Response:** While agreeing that discussing further the theoretical implications of the study would be valuable and interesting, this is beyond the scope of the country case

studies. The country case studies are one part of the overall EUPopLink project. Their narrow objective is to provide an empirical account of the link between populism and Euroscepticism in European countries. Drawing more extensive theoretical implications, including along the lines suggested, will be the task of the next steps of the project. I have, however, added a sentence in the conclusion to stress the dynamic nature of Euroscepticism and the need for future research to expand upon and explain this finding.

Party positions and public understanding of the EU

'A further aspect that remains somewhat underdeveloped concerns the level of public understanding of the European Union (EU) within the Italian context. While the article convincingly reconstructs party-based Eurosceptic narratives, it devotes comparatively less attention to the broader social and cognitive environment in which such narratives gain electoral resonance. In particular, the article could benefit from a more explicit discussion of the widespread uncertainty surrounding the actual functioning of EU institutions, the relationship between European law and the Italian constitutional order, and the concrete impact of EU decision-making on Italy's economic, social, and financial governance. Issues concerning the primacy of EU law, direct effect, and the interaction between national and supranational competences remain largely absent from public debate, despite their central relevance for understanding both support for and opposition to European integration. [...]'

- **Response:** This comment offers a thoughtful and valuable reflection on the link between party-based Euroscepticism and voter-based Euroscepticism, an aspect that this country report admittedly does not engage with. However, this is a comment that the country report itself cannot do justice to or fully engage with. The country reports are meant to centre on the supply-side of populism and Euroscepticism and offer a concise summary of this specific aspect of the populism/euroscepticism nexus. Other parts of the EUPopLink project look more closely at voters, and could, potentially, offer further points of reflection on this comment. To clarify the focus on the supply-side, I have nonetheless added a direct reference to it in the introduction.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 07 May 2026

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The report addresses an interesting and relevant topic, focusing on the relationship between

Italy's populist parties and their Euroscepticism. The report is well structured and clear in its language. The empirical analysis is detailed and accurate. It provides a comprehensive overview of populist parties in Italy, their positions on the European Union (EU) and the implications for political competition with mainstream parties. To strengthen the report, I have three main recommendations.

While Forza Italia has often been associated with a personalistic, leader-centred and media-driven form of party organisation, it is less clear whether it can be straightforwardly classified as a populist party in the same sense as the Movimento 5 Stelle or the Lega. In particular, the report should clarify whether Forza Italia has historically articulated a sufficiently strong anti-elitist discourse to justify its inclusion in the populist party family. If the author's argument is that Forza Italia represents a specific type of populism, for instance centred on Berlusconi's direct relationship with 'the people', this should be mentioned more explicitly and backed by empirical evidence. Alternatively, the report could rely more explicitly on the relevant academic literature to justify this categorisation. At present, the inclusion of Forza Italia risks appearing somewhat asserted rather than fully justified.

Second, while the report provides a convincing descriptive account of Italian populist parties' evolving stances towards the EU, it somewhat neglects the drivers behind such an evolution. In particular, the report argues that 'it is hard to ascribe this [changed position] to a response to any of the EU's most recent crises'. However, there is a large literature demonstrating that the EU's own response to these crises – most notably the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian war on Ukraine – has indeed contributed to affecting populist parties' positions on Europe (see Braun et al. 2019; Capati et al. 2024; and Capati and Trastulli 2025). The author mentions some of these findings in a late paragraph but these sources are never acknowledged. Incidentally, one of these works deals specifically with how mainstream and populist parties have used the EU issue during crises to attack each other (see Capati 2025), which is what the report refers to in its section 4. on responses to Euroscepticism and related consequences.

Finally, the conclusion should be expanded. At this stage, the concluding section identifies some interesting patterns but does not sufficiently spell out the broader significance of the report's contribution. The author could use the conclusion to clarify what the Italian case tells us about the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism more generally, and whether Euroscepticism should be understood as a stable ideological feature or as a more flexible political strategy. The conclusion could also reflect more explicitly on the implications of the findings for broader debates on party competition, crisis politics and the evolution of populist parties once they enter government or face EU-level constraints. The paper would also benefit from a more detailed indication of possible avenues for future research, including comparative work on other European countries or further analysis of the factors shaping populist parties' changing positions on the EU.

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Is the background of the case's history and progression described in sufficient detail?
Yes

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Partly

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Is the case presented with sufficient detail to be useful for teaching or other practitioners?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: European integration, party competition, EU economic governance, EU financial assistance, EU crises

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 18 May 2026

Marta Lorimer

Thank you for your detailed and constructive feedback. Below, I detail how I have addressed the three main recommendations made in the report. **Recommendation 1: Justifying the inclusion of Forza Italia**

'While Forza Italia has often been associated with a personalistic, leader-centred and media-driven form of party organisation, it is less clear whether it can be straightforwardly classified as a populist party in the same sense as the Movimento 5 Stelle or the Lega. In particular, the report should clarify whether Forza Italia has historically articulated a sufficiently strong anti-elitist discourse to justify its inclusion in the populist party family. If the author's argument is that Forza Italia represents a specific type of populism, for instance centred on Berlusconi's direct relationship with 'the people', this should be mentioned more explicitly and backed by empirical evidence. Alternatively, the report could rely more explicitly on the relevant academic literature to

justify this categorisation. At present, the inclusion of Forza Italia risks appearing somewhat asserted rather than fully justified.'

- **Response:** Thank you for raising this point. In response, I have added references to existing literature that classes Forza Italia under Berlusconi as a populist party (Bobba and McDonnell, 2016; Mudde, 2007; Verbeek and Zaslove, 2016). I have also added a clarification that the 'populist' aspect was most prevalent when Berlusconi was leader.

Recommendation 2: Expanding the analytical insights with reference to recent literature

'Second, while the report provides a convincing descriptive account of Italian populist parties' evolving stances towards the EU, it somewhat neglects the drivers behind such an evolution. In particular, the report argues that 'it is hard to ascribe this [changed position] to a response to any of the EU's most recent crises'. However, there is a large literature demonstrating that the EU's own response to these crises – most notably the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian war on Ukraine – has indeed contributed to affecting populist parties' positions on Europe (see Braun et al. 2019; Capati et al. 2024; and Capati and Trastulli 2025). The author mentions some of these findings in a late paragraph but these sources are never acknowledged. Incidentally, one of these works deals specifically with how mainstream and populist parties have used the EU issue during crises to attack each other (see Capati 2025), which is what the report refers to in its section 4. on responses to Euroscepticism and related consequences.'

- **Response:** Thank you for this comment and for offering the opportunity to clarify the argument. I have revised this paragraph to state that while it is hard to ascribe party's changed positions to any individual crisis, crises did likely have an impact on some of these changes. I have also integrated the suggested articles in the piece.

Recommendation 3: Expanding the conclusion

'Finally, the conclusion should be expanded. At this stage, the concluding section identifies some interesting patterns but does not sufficiently spell out the broader significance of the report's contribution. The author could use the conclusion to clarify what the Italian case tells us about the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism more generally, and whether Euroscepticism should be understood as a stable ideological feature or as a more flexible political strategy. The conclusion could also reflect more explicitly on the implications of the findings for broader debates on party competition, crisis politics and the evolution of populist parties once they enter government or face EU-level constraints. The paper would also benefit from a more detailed indication of possible avenues for future research, including comparative work on other European countries or further analysis of the factors shaping populist parties' changing positions on the EU.'

- **Response:** While agreeing that extending the conclusion would be potentially valuable and interesting, the length of the conclusion is constrained by the strict country report guidelines provided by the EUPopLink Working Group 1 (available here: https://www.eupoplink.eu/node/17). Country report authors were invited to keep the concluding section to a 'brief summary and reflection on comparative idiosyncrasies of case and/or implications of analysis for broader research area', as drawing more comprehensive (comparative) implications will be the goal of the project's subsequent phases. In light of this consideration, and of the requirement to keep the report within the 3000 word limit set by the project, I have opted not to expand the conclusion extensively. I have, however, added a sentence to stress the

importance of understanding Euroscepticism as a dynamic feature whose changing nature requires explaining. Further reflections on the implications of the findings of the reports, including along the lines suggested by the review, will be explored in future EUPopLink research.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 05 May 2026

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The article addresses a highly relevant and compelling topic, exploring the intricate relationship between populism and Euroscepticism within the Italian political landscape. The author provides a detailed and nuanced account of the similarities and differences among key political parties regarding their Eurosceptic stances. A particular strength of the work is its original presentation of the paradoxes and evolving trends that characterize Italian party politics, offering valuable insights into how these movements navigate European integration.

The historical background and the progression of the party system are well-documented, and the article is clearly written. However, to further strengthen the paper and ensure it is fully scientifically sound, I have one primary recommendation:

In the concluding section, the authors should provide a more explicit and systematic classification of the Italian parties within the established theoretical framework of Euroscepticism. While the descriptions are thorough, a clear, theory-driven categorization would help synthesize the findings and provide a more robust academic contribution. Specifically, linking the empirical observations more tightly to the theoretical types of Euroscepticism (e.g., hard vs. soft, or polity vs. policy-based) in the final discussion would clarify the overarching patterns identified in the study.

Is the background of the case's history and progression described in sufficient detail?
Yes

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
No source data required

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Is the case presented with sufficient detail to be useful for teaching or other practitioners?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Political Science, Party Politics, Populism, and Euroscepticism.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Author Response 18 May 2026

Marta Lorimer

Thank you for your positive evaluation of the country report on Italy and for your suggestion to improve the piece further. In response to the following recommendation concerning how the text could be improved:
'In the concluding section, the authors should provide a more explicit and systematic classification of the Italian parties within the established theoretical framework of Euroscepticism. While the descriptions are thorough, a clear, theory-driven categorization would help synthesize the findings and provide a more robust academic contribution. Specifically, linking the empirical observations more tightly to the theoretical types of Euroscepticism (e.g., hard vs. soft, or polity vs. policy-based) in the final discussion would clarify the overarching patterns identified in the study.'

- **Response:** I have added a sentence in the conclusion that summarises the findings with respect to the theoretical categories discussed earlier in the text and in the theoretical framework for the project (Lorimer et al. 2026, EUPopLink n.d.).

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.