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► **To cite this version:**

Christian Lamour. The league of leagues: Meta-populism and the ‘chain of equivalence’ in a cross-border Alpine area. *Political Geography*, 2020, 81, pp.[En ligne]. 10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102207 . hal-03136500

**HAL Id: hal-03136500**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03136500>**

Submitted on 9 Feb 2021

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# The league of leagues: Meta-populism and the 'chain of equivalence' in a cross-border Alpine area

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Radical right populism  
Regionalism  
Borders  
Europe  
Critical discourse analysis  
Dialogism

## ABSTRACT

Radical right populist parties claim to act on behalf of people who need to be protected from a series of risks initiated by 'others'. Border control is a key topic in the narratives developed by these movements in Europe. However, populist parties located in different states can shape a cohesive discourse across state borders with regard to the protection of the people. They consequently forge a discursive 'chain of equivalence' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 144) implying the reduction of state-bounded differences while preserving some territorial singularities. This process, which can be termed 'meta-populism' (de Cleen, 2017, p. 356) supposes a series of interactions, which are not often analysed in Europe's borderlands. Based on a Critical Discourse analysis, we investigate the building-up of transregional meta-populism powered by two regionalist parties positioned in different states, but located in a single European area: the Regio Insubrica in-between Italy and Switzerland.

## 1. Introduction

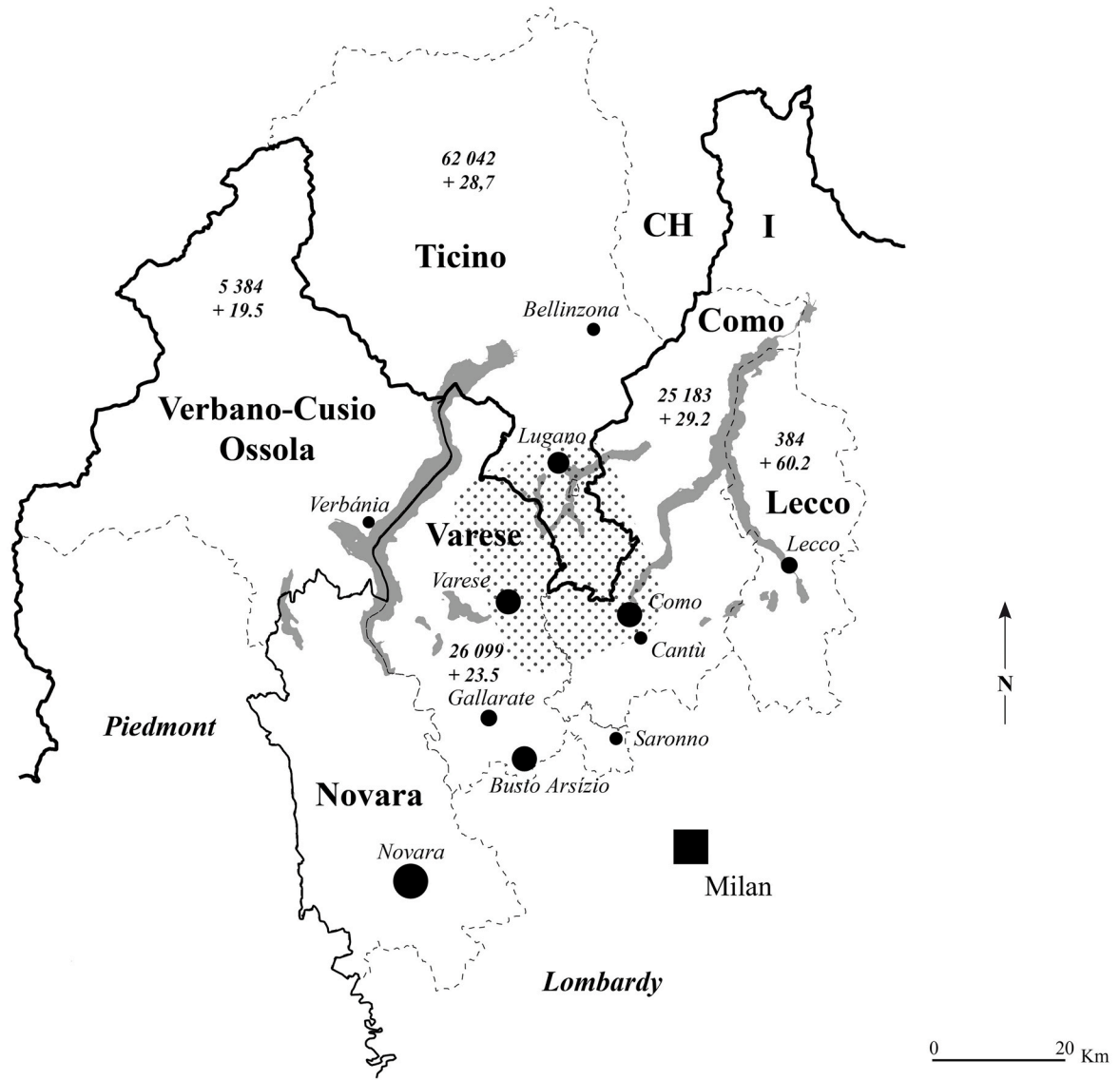
The surge of radical right populism is one of the key features of contemporary European democracies (Stanley, 2017; Taggart, 2017). Most states are characterised by the presence of populist parties, claiming to represent a homogenous and pure 'people', let down and threatened by a multi-faceted, internationalised and deprived/corrupted elite (intellectuals, journalists, liberal politicians, big business, etc.) assisted by a series of 'others', from poor migrants and Muslim communities to supra-national institutions (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Canovan, 1981). These parties develop narratives based on a 'logic of equivalence [that is] the simplification of the political space' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 130), implying the presence of discursive elements to be substituted for one another to construct antagonism between the people and the 'others'. Matteo Salvini, the president of the Italian *League* (previously the *Northern League*) and also Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior between June 2018 and August 2019, is currently one of the most emblematic of the European radical right populist leaders implementing a European 'logic of equivalence' in the context of the so-called migrant crisis. Salvini became one of the advocates of a united Europe based on a 'league of leagues', which would associate 'all the free and sovereign movements that want to defend their people and their borders' (Giufridda, 2018). However, is it possible for radical-right populist parties localised in

European borderlands and separated by state borders to join forces in order to represent the interests of transregional people? Is this potential meta-populism structured by parties having a balanced capacity to shape a political agenda across state borders?

The objective in the current article is to explore the potential existence of transregional populism across state borders, by investigating a case study characterised by the presence of strong regional populist parties and a process of economic interdependence: the Regio Insubrica, which includes the Canton of Ticino in Switzerland and five Italian provinces in Lombardy and Piedmont, where the executives in power collaborate in a shared institution, a "working community",<sup>1</sup> to develop a dialogue and strategies in favour of the cross-border area (Fig. 1). Our scope is to explore the potential 'chain of equivalence' produced by populist politicians beyond state borders when addressing a series of controversies related to cross-border economic integration. As defined by Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 144), the chain of equivalence is the logic of simplification and negativity used by hegemonic social formations to signify themselves, and is aimed at creating a horizon composed of separated antagonistic forces. We suggest that the co-presence of regional populist parties in a cross-border environment, together with the presence of transfrontier integration issues, can potentially lead to the construction of a shared chain of equivalence implying common antagonistic forces across the state border. The co-present regional parties are expected to combine a simplified and cohesive discourse

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.regioinsubrica.org/comunita-di-lavoro/finalita/>.



Authors: Christian Lamour, Konrad Skoczylas, LISER, 2020  
 Cartographic source for the administrative boundaries: EuroGeographics

Main cities of the Regio Insubrica

- 100 000
- 80 000
- 40 000

■ Nearby metropolis

25 183 Cross-border workers in 2014\*  
 + 29.2 Growth since 2010 (%)

● Main concentration of cross-border workers

**Ticino**

Swiss canton/Italian provinces of the Regio Insubrica

**Lombardy**

Italian regions whose provinces are in the Regio Insubrica



Boundaries of the Swiss canton/Italian provinces



Boundaries of the Italian regions



State border between Italy and Switzerland



Lakes of the Regio Insubrica

\*Italian Provinces (places of residence), Swiss Canton (places of work)  
 Province of Novara (less than 380 resident cross-border workers)  
 Source: USTAT/OST-TI.

Fig. 1. The regio insubrica.

implying a rescaling of populist claims across state border. Following a review of the literature concerning the development of meta-populism beyond the state border, the argument and the case study are presented. The results are then structured in three parts. The first is dedicated to the potential cross-border 'chain of equivalence' built up by the two parties aiming to antagonise a potential transregional people and external 'others'. The second concerns the existing differences between representatives of the two parties with regard to the discursive formulation of the cross-border controversies. Last, there is a focus on the populist style used on both sides of the border to address these controversies. The discursive approach of cross-border problems, and to a certain extent the style chosen to structure the arguments, are considered as complementary ways to grasp the transfrontier populist dynamics and the potential dominance of one party over the other one in shaping and addressing antagonist issues in this borderland region.

## 2. Radical right populism beyond state borders: Common denominators, scalar perspectives and meta-populism

As suggested by Stanley, 'the sheer openness and contestability of populism's core concepts makes it a receptive partner for full ideologies' (Stanley, 2008, p. 107). Radical-right populism is characterized by three combined ideological backgrounds: *nativism*, *authoritarianism* and *populism* (Mudde, 2017, p. 4). *Nativism* is an ideology that considers that a state or territory should be inhabited solely by its imagined native and homogenous group, while so-called alien people (immigrants, minorities, etc.) and/or ideas are considered a threat to this homogenous native group and its territory. *Authoritarianism* supposes a belief in an ordered society where contestation of the authority must be punished, through a strengthening of law and order policies. Lastly, *populism* implies the definition of an antagonistic society, including a deprived/corrupted elite (disconnected from or working against a 'pure people'). Radical-right populism has been strongly associated with state-bordered nationalism, but it can also be nurtured at the regional scale. Regionalism is one of the ideological backgrounds on which this type of populism leans, as proved in Northern Italy and in Flanders (Albertazzi, 2006; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Tarchi, 2008). Populism supposes the deployment of a political strategy on different spatial scales (Agnew & Shin, 2017; Lamour & Varga, 2017). This populism at the regional scale often puts forward the existence of an idealised heartland, peopled by a localised and homogenous community antagonised by central state politics (Taggart, 2017). European integration might offer a context favouring the development of regional-scale populist movements in their tension with central state authorities (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017). The crisis of political and institutional legitimacy in specific countries such as Italy and Belgium could also favour this regional populist trend (Taggart, 2004). However, the spatial agenda of these regionalist parties (regional independence or autonomy) can be flexible. It is emblematic of the broader chameleonic nature of populist parties and leaders (Taggart, 2017; Weyland, 2017) as proved by Matteo Salvini, the leader of the *Lega Nord* rescaling his party at the Italian national scale to obtain access to the voters of the crumbling centre-right (Tarchi, 2018).

Two other fixed dominators are often found in the vast spectrum of the radical right populist movements in Europe. First, there is a specific rhetoric linked to the common people, the 'low' side of political communications (Ostiguy, 2017), even if some populist politicians are able to soften and polish their discourses (Wodak, 2015). Second, these political movements can combine narratives related to the defence of spatially bounded populations located in different states. The so-called 2015 refugee crisis and the consecutive management of state borders in Europe has offered an opportunity for some of these parties to intensify their nativist, authoritarian and populist argumentation with a cross-national dimension: the defence of Europeans made up of multiple homogenous in-groups to be protected by more radical law and order measures on the part of each sovereign state. This is a position favoured

by the securitization context that followed 9/11 (Lamour, 2019; Popescu, 2012; Wodak, 2015). The international alliances of right-wing populist activists can make the emergence of "meta-populism" possible, implying the discursive construction of a transnational "people" opposed to common "outgroups". Meta-populism can be defined as an ideology consisting of producing a people vs. an elite and "others" antagonism beyond the institutional and democratic boundaries associated with a specific state; that is, a spatial rescaling of the confrontation between "us" and "them." It represents the building up of an upper-level 'chain of equivalence' that can reduce national or regional differences without eliminating the different demands articulated by populist parties within state-bounded public spheres. This meta-populism is generally related to stronger border control to protect a seemingly common European population comprising a mosaic of sovereign or autonomous national/regional 'people' betrayed by states in favour of a borderless Europe. The growing European populist narratives reveal the fact that 'populism is historically linked to a crisis of the dominant ideological discourse which is in turn part of a more general social crisis' (Laclau, 1977, p. 175). It reveals more precisely the two dimensions of the Laclauian 'dislocation' (Laclau, 1990, p. 5) of the European political order, implying the progressive and partial failure of the dominant and liberal system of representation, and the discursive and radical construction of a new system by populist agents (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2017).

Some European regions that include only parts of different states can share a common cultural and institutional context, which can potentially facilitate the building of cross-border meta-populism. For example, the Alpine region—including Southern Germany (especially Bavaria), Austria, Switzerland, Northern Italy and Central-East France—has been viewed as a specific European area nurturing a similar form of regional populism based on a common rejection of late modern phenomena such as the development of a more cosmopolitan society (Betz, 2005; Caramani & Wagemann, 2005). However, these border regions can also be specific locations where radical right populist activists develop an antagonistic discourse between their regional population and people located just on the other side of the border. For instance, in order to secure votes among Swiss workers, the Swiss radical right populist parties in Geneva and Ticino have successfully developed a discourse against cross-border workers coming respectively from France and Italy (Bernhard, 2017; Mazzoleni, 2016). Populist parties located on different sides of a single cross-border region can share a common identity, such as in the Alpine context. However, they can also be dependent on voters who are antagonised for electoral purposes when there is cross-border economic integration. Is it therefore possible, as a consequence, for radical right populist parties embedded in these intertwined and economically unbalanced cross-border areas to collectively shape transregional meta-populism? Populism is a phenomenon which requires geographically-grounded approaches to be better understood (Lizotte, 2019).

## 3. Argument, case study and methodology

It is argued that European cross-border areas characterised by dissymmetric economic integration together with the presence of radical right populist and regionalist parties on both sides of the border, can result in a scale of transregional meta-populism based on a common 'chain of equivalence'. However, we can expect that the representatives of these parties will not advocate the reduction of regional differences found locally, but will propose above all a 'dislocation' of the liberal construction of cross-border regions in Europe normally based on freedom of movement and balanced political governance. This promoted dislocation could reveal an unbalanced capacity of state-bordered populist parties to lead a discursive agenda. A European 'league of leagues' in this specific context is not necessarily a horizontal association between leagues, but most probably a matter of the supremacy of one league over the other, to construct the threats and the required nativist,

authoritarian and populist policies to protect the regional heartlands co-present in a single European area.

The case study we use is the Regio Insubrica, located in the Italian-speaking Alps (Fig. 1). It regroups the Swiss canton of Ticino and five Italian provinces, of which one is in Piedmont (Verbano-Cusio-Ossola) and four in Lombardy (Como, Lecco, Novara and Varese). The Regio Insubrica is characterised by the long-term presence of two, strong, regional and radical-right populist parties: the *Lega Nord* in Italy and the *Lega dei Ticinesi* in Switzerland (Albertazzi, 2007; Mazzoleni & Mueller, 2017). The *Lega Nord* was based on a grouping of small leagues attached to specific Italian regions, arguing for an increased devolution of powers from the Italian central state in the 1980s. Later, it aimed for independence for a single Northern Italian Region, peopled by a new born 'Padania Nation' (Biorcio, 2003; McDonnell, 2006a; McDonnell, 2006b). Meta-populism between regionalist movements in Northern Italy linked to specific areas (Veneto, Lombardy, Piedmont, etc.), and based on a transregional and imaginary Padania heartland opposed to Rome and the Italian south, was strong enough to secure the success of the party in some electoral ballots (Bobba & Legnante, 2017). The *Lega dei Ticinesi*, founded in the early 1990s, has used the same strategy of regional distance to the central state, Bern, while also using antagonism to the south, meaning the *Lega Nord* Italian heartland where the scapegoated cross-border workers employed in Ticino live. This Swiss league is not against the Swiss central state, but disapproves of its international and immigration policies, which are presented as a threat to the protection of native minorities in Switzerland, such as the *Ticinese* (Mazzoleni & Ruzza, 2018); The nativist slogan of the party in 2019 being 'Masters in our house so as not to end up in the reservations like the Indians'. The Regio Insubrica is a key example where it is possible to explore the context-based complexities between two bounded territorial regions (currently ruled by populist parties emphasizing regional and state bordering) and a relational regional space experienced by the two interdependent territories (Murphy et al., 2015). The relatively recent move by Matteo Salvini to transform the *Lega Nord* into an undifferentiated national league has changed the profile of populism on the Italian side of the Regio Insubrica (Passarelli & Tuorto, 2018; Zulianello, 2019). Nevertheless, Northern Italy remains the *Lega's* stronghold (Albertazzi, Giovannini, & Seddone, 2018), and the authoritarian dimension of the *Lega Nord* at the Italian scale was expressed in previous governmental coalitions led by Berlusconi (Albertazzi & Mueller, 2017).

As populist parties are quick at absorbing contextual crises in order to shape antagonistic discourses, we analysed the discourses produced by populist politicians of both leagues concerning different cross-border tensions developed in this region between 2010 and 2012. It was decided to focus on this period because of the coalescence of three intertwining, multi-scalar tensions involving the selected radical-right populist parties. This period was characterized by an international tension between states, a cross-border tension between regional executives and a tense populist electoral campaign in Ticino with a cross-border dimension. The analysis and discussions in the current article are valid exclusively for this multi-scalar and temporal context, in which three tensions developed as follows. First, a tax crisis involving the decision of the Italian central state to put Switzerland (and consequently the Ticino city of Lugano) in its international tax haven black list, accompanied by the decision of the elected Ticino government to block tax transfers to the Italian state related to cross-border workers residing in Italy. The populist politicians of the *Lega dei Ticinesi* wanted in parallel to reduce the percentage of this tax transfer and the number of cross-border workers coming from Italy. Second, turmoil around the Regio Insubrica cross-border activity plan, due to different views about its purposes and the perceived lack of usefulness. Third, the political campaign carried out in Ticino against Italian cross-border workers portrayed as 'rats eating the cheese of Swiss residents'. It is important to add that the Regio Insubrica is characterised by one of the strongest flows of cross-border workers in Europe. A quarter of the people employed in the Swiss canton of Ticino come daily from the nearby

Italian provinces. That amounted to more than 64 000 people in 2016, a number that has been growing exponentially during the 2000s (OFS, 2017). Consequently, there is unbalanced economic integration, with an economic centre based in Ticino and a residential periphery in Italy, where the local councils largely depend on the cross-border tax transfer from Ticino to finance a range of public services. This unbalanced integration has been taking place since the late 1960s (Leimgruber, 1991).

The mass media is an indispensable tool for spreading the populist cause in the public sphere (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004; Lamour, 2017, 2019; Mazzoleni, 2008). Consequently, we decided to carry out an analysis on the mass-mediated regional populist discourses printed in the press from both sides of the Regio Insubrica between July 2010 and June 2012. The following methodology was chosen. First, there was an exhaustive process of collecting articles mentioning the three selected controversial matters (the tax issue, the Regio Insubrica collaboration and the Swiss populist campaign about Italian rats) in 11 mainstream newspapers targeting the Italian,<sup>2</sup> Swiss<sup>3</sup> or cross-border population<sup>4</sup> of the area: 281 articles. Second, the objective was to single out articles including quotes exclusively by regional populist politicians: 52% of the total, 145 articles. Following a broad review on who was quoted, two types of politicians were considered for analysis in terms of political viewpoints. First, the leaders of parties: Giuliano Bignasca (who died in 2013 and was the founder of the Swiss *Lega dei Ticinesi*), Umberto Bossi, founder and long-term leader of the Italian *Lega Nord*, and Roberto Maroni who succeeded him in 2012. Second, the most frequently mentioned key public office holders of the *Lega dei Ticinesi*<sup>5</sup> and the *Lega Nord*.<sup>6</sup> The viewpoint of specific politicians concerning the three topics of tensions are exposed in the research analysis through the presence of referenced newspaper articles that best synthesize their positions; keeping in mind that not all politicians are quoted by the newspapers on the three subjects and that a specific quotation of one politician can be mentioned in many articles. Lastly, the qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis focuses on a series of quotes (mentioned in the text) that can best expose two phenomena. First, the existence of a cross-border meta-populism based on a common opponent opposed to the Italian and Swiss regional heartlands, and potentially implying the use of three parallel ideologies: nativism, authoritarianism and populism. Second, the potential supremacy of one league over the other in the shaping of this meta-populism; a supremacy revealed in terms of shared argumentation (dialogic and polyphonic discourses) and discursive style. The following parameters of the Critical Discourse Analysis are taken into consideration when paying attention to the quotes (Richardson & Wodak, 2013; Wodak, 2001): the definition of in-groups within the Regio Insubrica and out-groups outside of it (*the nomination*), the

<sup>2</sup> *Il Giorno*, *Lombardia News* (section dedicated to Varese), *La Provincia di Como*, *Il Corriere della Sera* (section dedicated to Como) and *La Repubblica* (section dedicated to Lombardia).

<sup>3</sup> *Il Corriere del Ticino*, *La Regione*, *Il Giornale del Popolo*, *Ticinonews*, *Ticinoline.ch*.

<sup>4</sup> *Infoinsubria.com*.

<sup>5</sup> Norman Gobbi, member of the Ticino government (State Council) in charge of the 'Institution Department' regrouping different responsibilities including home affairs, justice and finance up to 2011. Marco Borradori, member of the Ticino government at first in charge of the 'Territorial Department' dealing with environmental, mobility and development issues and later as president of the Ticino government, without mentioning his presidency of the cross-border Regio Insubrica. Lorenzo Quadri, MP of the Ticino Council till 2011 and then member of the Swiss national council as well as being the deputy mayor of Lugano.

<sup>6</sup> Dario Galli, president of the provincial government of Varese and also president of the Regio Insubrica before Marco Borradori. Marco Giovanni Reguzzoni, ex-president of the province of Varese and *Lega Nord* group leader in the Italian national parliament during the 2010–2012 period. Davide Boni, president of the Lombardy Regional Council.

positive/negative labelling of these groups (*the predication*), the argumentation around the tensions (*the topoi*), the attitude of regional populist politicians concerning these tensions (*the perspectivation*) and the tendency of these politicians to intensify or to reduce these tensions (*the intensification/mitigation*).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) brings the critical tradition of social analysis into language studies and contributes to critical social analysis a particular focus on discourse and on relations between discourse and other social elements (power relations, ideologies, institutions, social identities, and so forth) (Fairclough, 2012, p. 9). CDA implies a problem-oriented approach and a linguistic expertise (Wodak, 2001). It starts off from the basis that discourse, which is language in use, is an interactive social action involved in the definition of a social reality, such as objects, situations and social relations. CDA supposes that discourse is 'socially constitutive as well as socially shaped' (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258). It is suitable to uncover the discursive plans of populist activists, because it helps us to grasp the broad structure of texts involving propositions, implications, pre-suppositions and coherent descriptions structuring sequences of opposition between 'we' and 'others' (van Dijk, 1998; 2013). CDA helps to uncover 'the discursive strategies of dissimulation (aiming at the construction of differences, us vs them) and the discursive strategies of assimilation (aiming at the construction of sameness)' expressing the power structure in a given social context (de Cillia, Reisigl, & Wodak, 2013, p. 121). In parallel, one should also not forget that speeches have a dialogic and a polyphonic dimension, as suggested by Bakhtin (1981; 1984). This comprises respectively 1) a 'multi-accentuality of signs and meaning' (Barker, 2004, p. 50) meaning how words are directed to an addressee and to other words to shape the collective and differentiated meaning of a phenomenon in a given context and 2) the multiplicity of voices in each speech and the differences that exist between the views of each speaker and their use of other people's discourses in their own speech (Lorda & Zabalbeascoa, 2012; Roulet, Filliettaz, & Grobet, 2001). Research into the dialogic and polyphonic dimensions of discourse can help us to better understand the dominance process taking place in cross-border populist partnerships and the specific positioning of each key populist activist in the political power structure on both sides of the border. Consequently, special attention is paid to the discursive connections between populist discourses put forward by different agents across the state border.

#### 4. Meta-populism in the Italian-speaking cross-border Alps: The construction of heartlands and the multi-faceted Swiss political dominance

Both parties have a common representation of 'outgroups' and a portrayal of themselves as representatives of the regional people when speaking about the tax issues. Some differences are apparent when spokespeople of the two parties address the political campaign against cross-border workers representing Italians as rats. The relaunch of a cross-border collaboration in the Regio Insubrica also offers room for different views. However, the discourses produced by both the radical right populist parties and the discursive style used by them reveal a supremacy of one political movement over the other one to shape meta-populism. The results are presented in three consecutive parts: 1) the antagonism structured around regional heartlands, revealing some nativist, authoritarian and populist tendencies in the Regio Insubrica, 2) the content-based expression of the Swiss discursive supremacy in approaching antagonistic issues and 3) a style-based analysis of the same Helvetic dominance.

##### 4.1. The fight for the marginalised heartlands: The negative central states and reactive populism

As suggested by Taggart (2017), populist movements structured at the regional scale present themselves as the protectors of a downscaled

'heartlands', imagined as endangered by a series of external risks. They are willing to find scapegoats beyond the regional boundaries, and especially to focus on the central state authorities viewed as a dominant power, marginalising their regions. Politicians from both the Regio Insubrica parties considered here have the same habit of negatively representing the central state power when addressing the tax problem between Italy and Switzerland. Their common 'logic of equivalence' enables them to establish a cross-border chain using an identical metonymy to represent this negative power. The countries (Italy and Switzerland)—but also the capital cities of these countries (Rome and Bern) where the central state power is located (the Italian government and the Confederation) and personified by some ministers (Giulio Tremonti, the Economy and Finance Minister in Italy)—are alternatively used to denote in a simplified manner the upper-level power responsible for the tax controversies affecting both Ticino and the five Italian provinces. However, a different predication is associated with each central state. The Swiss confederal power is exclusively represented negatively by the Swiss regional populists as weak and slow when interacting with the Italian state on the tax issue (Lara, 2012; Vignati, 2011), whereas the Italian state is defined by the Swiss and Italian politicians as slow, rigid, offensive or needing to change its policy unilaterally in the negotiations. The representatives of the Italian league generally forbid themselves from criticising the Swiss central state, with the exception of Galli, the President of the Province of Varese. This politician has expressed some exasperation about the attitude of the Swiss side in general (Il *Corriere del Ticino*, 2010). However, a few months later, the perspectivation of the issue by Galli had changed. He was not mitigating the problem, but relativizing the criticism addressed to Swiss executives following a meeting with Marco Borradori of the *Lega dei Ticinesi*: 'I would have done the same thing [if I was on the other side of the border] [...] but, for us, it is a problem [not to receive the tax returns from Switzerland]' (della Ripa, 2011).

In parallel, the same 'topos of consequential' (Wodak, 2015, p. 50) was constructed on both sides of the border over two years; that is, if central states work together, the tax problem will be resolved, implying they are exclusively responsible for the crisis (Il *Giorno*, 2012; Lara & Righinetti, 2011). However, radical right populist activists from the two leagues are as much responsible as the central states in the tax crisis. The decision by the government of the Swiss Canton of Ticino ruled by the *Lega dei Ticinesi* to block the fiscal transfer due to Italy and related to Italian cross-border workers, was totally illegal according to the international agreement between the Swiss Confederation and the Italian Republic dating from 1974. As a radical-right populist party, the *Lega dei Ticinesi* believes in authoritarianism within the canton of Ticino, especially by promoting the securitization of the border (del Frate, 2011a). However, its representatives contest upper-level Swiss law and order to shape an antagonism between the regional heartland and the central state's institutions. The combination of nativist, authoritarian and populist ideologies associated with radical-right populism (Mudde, 2017) can imply potentially opposite discourses and policies at different spatial scales by regionalist movements, which do not take a stance of independence from the state. On its side, the Italian *Lega Nord* has been keen on participating in central state executive power—in contrast to the *Lega dei Ticinesi* in Switzerland (Ernst, Engesser, & Esser, 2017). It is part of the Berlusconi government that decided to put Switzerland on the black list of tax haven countries. Populist politicians can develop a cohesive and long-term omission of one or more responsibilities. Further, the narratives produced by both leagues are similar in terms of metonymy when they represent themselves. Parties, leaders of parties, and also the regional institutions that secure their political legitimacy are used alternatively to define the representation of a localised power defending the interests of the borderland heartlands against the central state authorities, and able to interact quickly and decisively at the cross-border regional level to fashion a common attitude in the crisis (Ascierto, 2011; Berti, 2011). They shape the narratives of transregional Alpine populism (Betz, 2005; Caramani & Wagemann, 2005).

Nevertheless, the presence of a clear common opponent (Rome/Italy) that secures the production of a 'chain of equivalence' by the two leagues, does not lead to a cross-border merging of the two territorial heartlands, as is evident from politicians on both sides (Il *Corriere del Ticino*, 2010; Silini, 2011). Some of them can sometimes talk about 'our cross-border territory' (della Ripa, 2012) or even contemplate the inclusion of the Italian provinces into the Canton of Ticino (Infosubria.com, 2011), however, this proclaimed territorial fusion is always momentary or imaginary. Meta-populism does not lead to a proclaimed cross-border and integrated nativist, authoritarian and populist agenda, but it is the basis of a relatively common discourse concerning a new order, supposedly serving the interests of the two co-present heartlands currently presented as disadvantaged by higher-scale state governments. There is a cross-border populist fusion to produce a hegemonic space of representation, dislocating the liberal order imposed by central state's politics in borderland Europe; a liberal order based on freedom of movement and a balanced political power across the border through a multi-scalar system of governance (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). This shows the complexities between bounded regions and relational space at the regional scale (Murphy et al., 2015). The cross-border and political relational space within the Regio Insubrica aims at reinforcing co-present and bounded regional territories. The represented new order is made possible because of the accepted dominance of the Swiss *lega* over the Italian one. It is revealed when we pay attention to the dialogic dimension of discourse; that is, how words are directed to an addressee and to other words to shape the collective and differentiated meaning of a phenomenon in a given context (Barker, 2004, p. 50).

#### 4.2. The league of leagues: The Swiss supremacy and cross-border dislocation

The discourse of the chosen four Swiss actors are cited in three quarters of articles, whereas the Italian populist stakeholders are only quoted in a third of them (Table 1). The dominance of the Swiss *Legha* over the Italian one to impose a populist order across the border is expressed in three ways. There are the echoes of Swiss proposals in the voice of *Legha Nord* politicians, the lack of echoes of Italian populist proposals in the voice of the *Legha dei Ticinesi* leaders, and the differentiated 'mitigation strategies' (Richardson & Wodak, 2013; Wodak, 2015) of representatives of both leagues. This process is visible when we pay attention to three controversies: the relaunch of the Regio Insubrica activity plan, the negative campaign against Italian cross-border workers and the resolution of the cross-border tax crisis; these three issues often being intertwined.

The Swiss *Legha* represented by Marco Borradori wants to change the statement of intent of the Regio Insubrica working community by giving the Ticino government the task of nominating the Regio secretary, 'preferably [a] citizen of the Canton' (Bobbia, 2010), a proposal which will be put in place.<sup>7</sup> This proposal has been accepted by Galli on the Italian side, who had—in the name of an undefined 'we'—agreed with this institutionalised and unbalanced and consequently authoritarian repartition of political power in the Regio Insubrica a few months earlier while using the word 'Ticino' instead of the 'Swiss *Legha*' in a logic of equivalence: 'If Ticino wants to change the current secretary and put [in] a Ticino one, we totally agree' (Ticinonews, 2010).

The attitudes of both leagues concerning the negative political campaign in Ticino scapegoating Italian cross-border workers—represented as rats eating the Swiss cheese—also reveals a differentiated 'mitigation strategy' by the Swiss and Italian representatives, together with the supremacy of the Swiss populist agents. This campaign has placed an emphasis on a key feature of radical right populism in the Western World (including the Italian *Legha Nord*); that is, the threat to

blue-collar workers by foreign low-qualified workers, as its electorate is largely found in this category (Beirich & Woods, 2000; von Beyme, 2011). The 'invasion of cross-border workers' formulated in the Swiss right-wing populist political campaign is symbolised by 'Fabrizio', the Italian rat of the city of Varese who works in Ticino as 'a bricklayer'; one key stereotype attached to Italians in immigration countries and cities (Zeitz, 2007). This is symbolic of the nativist dimension of radical-right populism. The non-native cross-border worker coming from Italy is stigmatized by his or her low-skilled professional occupation and the likening to a repulsive animal; a worker who is consequently portrayed as a parasite profiting from the stereotyped common good of the native Swiss: cheese. The Swiss *lega* denies responsibility for this campaign. However, it can put in place a mitigation strategy consisting of re-orientating the blame towards the Swiss central state, as suggested by the following official discourse of the 'Legha of Bignasca'. This discourse shows the image of Italian working-class rats as being negated. However, the *Legha dei Ticinesi* validates the populist political programme behind this antagonistic and nativist campaign. This use of disclaimers is common among right-wing populist agents, who manifest 'the denial of racism or exclusion and emphasise positive self-representation' (Wodak, 2015, p. 58). The following message reorients the blame towards the enemy of the regional heartland ('government'), while diminishing the vehemence of the campaign around rats ('perhaps provocative') and promoting the key characteristic of nativist discourse 'I am not racist/I am not in favour of exclusion but ...' (cross-border workers are not rats, but ...):

Giuliano Bignasca's movement is said to be 'completely extraneous' [of this campaign likening cross-border workers to rats] even if the content [of the message] 'is a great deal to be shared. It is clear that frontier workers are not rats'. The League 'observes with dismay that any violation of the politically correct immediately arises as a national case, while the real problems, raised in ways that are perhaps provocative, are ignored'. He then criticized the [national] government, which 'today is diligent in condemning' but not as diligent for the 'attacks' that had come from Italy (Righinetti & Giorgetti, 2010).

The Italian league condemns this campaign, but the mitigation strategy on the Italian side can consist of producing a cross-border 'chain of equivalence', helping to define an antagonism between a trans-regional people ('us') and common distant enemies ('clandestine workers or Muslims') while preserving the border separating the two embedded regional populations by focusing on the residential heartlands. The following discourse by Galli shows that he does not condemn the Swiss nativist propaganda from an ideological point of view (the stigmatisation of foreign low-qualified workers opposed to the Swiss natives). He simply repositions the Italian cross-border workers from the world of 'bricklayers' to the one of 'professionals', which he can also represent in other articles as a in-group of 'hyper-specialised personnel, from doctors to precision mechanics, passing through company executives' (Il *Giorno*, 2010). Galli also includes one fundamental word and meaning of the *Legha Nord* structural discourse to justify the cultural singularity of the Northern regions compared to Rome and the proximity with Ticino (replaced by 'Switzerland'); that is, the use of Italian dialect (Biorcio, 2003). The use of the Lombard dialect in Galli's argument can be considered as a willingness on his part to imagine a cross-border regional nativism bounding the Italian and Swiss sides of the Regio Insubrica. The cross-border worker from Varese is not a "rat" (a Swiss-bordered allegation for a public of Swiss natives), because he speaks the vernacular "Lombard" like the native Ticinese and does not invade the homes of the Ticinese at bedtimes:

One thing is the immigrant, especially the clandestine or the Muslim who has great cultural differences from us ... one thing is instead the [Italian] cross-border worker, who comes with professionalism and contributes to the wealth of the [Ticino] companies in which he works. I understand the fear of indiscriminate immigration that even

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.regioinsubrica.org/fileadmin/files/Dichiarazione\\_dIntesa\\_23.06.2017.pdf](https://www.regioinsubrica.org/fileadmin/files/Dichiarazione_dIntesa_23.06.2017.pdf) (Art. 10, p. 4).

**Table 1**  
Number of articles using quotations from populist politician(s).

Location of politicians	Type of leadership	Name	Number of articles with populist 'voices'				Total
			Single 'voice'	Multiple 'voices'			
				Same region	With opposite region	With both regions	
Switzerland	Party	Bignasca	48	5	6	0	59
	Public Office	Gobbi	38	4	4	1	47
		Borradori	48	6	11	1	66
		Quadri	45	8	0	0	53
Italy	Party/Public Office	Bossi	8	3	2	1	14
		Maroni	6	3	2	1	12
	Public Office	Galli	10	6	9	3	28
		Reguzzoni	21	0	3	0	24
		Boni	22	1	3	1	27

Note: Bignasca is quoted as the sole populist politician (out of the eight other ones) in 48 articles. Galli is cited in nine articles also mentioning quotes from Swiss populist politicians.

in Switzerland people rightly express, but the campaign [against Italian cross-border workers] is wrong because the frontier does not pose cultural problems, he [the cross-border worker] speaks in the Lombard [dialect] like the Ticinese, and then at 17.30, he returns home to Italy to sleep ... We have more affinities with Swiss people than with the Romans (Rotondo, 2010).

The Italian populist politicians can make proposals to have a less monocentric cross-border region polarised by Ticino, with a view to reducing the sentiments against cross-border workers at the basis of the Swiss right-wing populist parties' aggressive political campaigns. For instance, Galli proposes the construction of a cross-border, tax-free activity zone (Signorelli, 2010). Nevertheless, his proposal is not remobilised in the mass-mediated discourse of the Swiss *lega*, which is keener on researching how businesses based in the Italian provinces can have access to credit from Ticino banks (Nicola, 2012a). This Ticino-centred initiative implies a bordering policy related to the one also framed by the Italian *Lega Nord*, which has mentioned it when addressing the issue of development aid to the third world. It puts forward the idea that it was necessary, 'to help people in their country of origin [as] this prevents migrants from coming ... and coincides with their claim of protecting their own pure people' symbolised by their famous slogan 'Let's help the people in their country of origin-*Aiutiamo popoli a casa loro*' (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017, p. 394). This bank support proposal with its nativist connotation (the willingness to separate natives and non-natives coming from Italy), characteristic of radical-right populism, has been approved by some representatives of the *Lega Nord*. This is despite the fact that it would help to maintain the Swiss economic dominance over the Italian provinces, as it does not affect the fiscal advantage of Ticino (della Ripa, 2010; Nicola, 2012a; 2012b). The dialogue established by the two leagues shows Swiss supremacy in the exchange to determine a new hegemonic space of cross-border representation, consist of resisting an undifferentiated cross-border economic mobility and balanced operational power in the *Regio Insubrica* governance. However, this cohesive narrative is not simply expressed by the dialogic dimension of discourses with words and meanings migrating between and inflected by a series of speakers. It is also determined by the polyphonic structure of discourse (Lorda & Zabalbeascoa, 2012). There is more precisely a cross-border parallelism and complementarity in terms of populist styles linked to personalities, professional backgrounds and categories of leadership (parties vs. public offices).

#### 4.3. The polyphonic league of leagues: Stormy Bignasca, calming Bossi and the institutionalised others

Each of the leading radical right populist agents of the *Regio Insubrica* plays their own part in the cross-border ensemble without structural dissonances. This cohesive style enables us to see another

aspect of the Swiss populist leaders' dominance. There is primarily the duo of the founding fathers of the two leagues, Bignasca and Bossi, with a clear leading role played by Bignasca who developed the most aggressive style when arguing for greater autonomy and border control to be put in place by the Canton of Ticino. He was especially good at using vulgar references, the low side of political discourse (Ostiguy, 2017), for example by asking the Ticino government not to 'lower their pants' in the Swiss tax controversy (Righinetti, 2011). The party leader also formulated the most threatening judgments and most negative reputation concerning Italy (Marelli, 2011), and could use the metaphor of the 'war' to represent the economic interactions between Italy and Switzerland (La Regione, 2012). Years before Trump asked for a wall between the US and Mexico to protect the American people from southern crimes and immigration, Bignasca had demanded a cemented, impenetrable border between Switzerland and Italy for the same reasons (del Frate, 2011a). He remains the symbolic representation of an imagined radical right populist and strong leader, who 'like a drunken guest with bad manners disrupts the normal dinner table, much to the discomfort, even alarm, of the usual patrons' (Oliver and Rahn, 2016, p. 191). His aggressive style secured his presence in the Italian press, and he was the only Swiss populist who was more mass mediated in Italy than in his home country. The Italian media focuses on these negative and sensationalist discourses diffused among Italian residents, which could consequently contribute to the limited promotion of meta-populism in Lombardy and Piedmont. The role of the mass media needs to be better understood in order to explore the spread and acceptance of populist ideas and actions (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004; Lamour, 2017, 2019; Mazzoleni, 2008). Furthermore, in this context he remains the second most quoted politician after the president of the Ticino Council, Borradori (Table 2).

The Italian press recognises him as the 'Bossi of Lugano' (Casicci, 2011), which is correct, as the style of Bignasca was inspired by his Italian counterpart (Albertazzi, 2007). Bossi is less often cited than Bignasca by all the press (Table 2), but he uses the same argumentative style. He especially mobilises two intertwined dimensions of the low appeal in politics (Ostiguy, 2017): the nativist argument ('we are from here') and the informal proximity ('feast, dinner and drink'), while also mentioning a key aspect of the *Lega Nord*'s political rupture in the Italian public, the use of Italian dialect (Biorcio, 2003) as illustrated in the two following quotations. The mention of the two equivalent dialects and the familiarity of relationships by Bossi are part of a strategy to counter-balance the populist attack of Bignasca with a cross-border and regional nativist argumentation. He reacts in a similar way to Galli when he is confronted with the Swiss representation of Italian workers as "rats," but by offering his personal perspective (he recalls the cross-border environment of the natives by remembering speeches in dialect and expecting a feast) while Galli's argument is at a collective level (we vs.



**Table 2**  
The importance of mass-mediated politician quotations on both sides of the border.

Location of politicians	Type of leadership	Name of politicians	Number of articles using their quotations			
			Swiss newspapers	Italian newspapers	Cross-border newspaper	Total
Switzerland	Party	Bignasca	21	32	6	59
	Public office	Gobbi	36	5	6	47
		Borradori	56	5	5	66
		Quadri	39	6	8	53
Italy	Party/Public office	Bossi	7	4	3	14
		Maroni	7	3	2	12
	Public office	Galli	17	8	3	28
		Reguzzoni	11	7	6	24
		Boni	18	6	3	27

Muslims, we vs. Rome):

I know Bignasca; when they do the [party's] feast, if they invite me, I'll take Tremonti [the Italian finance minister behind the black list] with me ... If that's the case, he said ironically, 'we'll bring him with a revolver'. The leader of the Northern League also said that 'I have good memories of Ticino. In Piazza Grande in Locarno, I made my first meeting with Bignasca, with many people listening to us who spoke the dialect, I the [dialect of] Varese and him the Ticinese' (della Ripa & Lara, 2011).

The people of Ticino are friends of ours and a beer or a dinner all together will be enough [to overcome the tax controversy] because good manners are important too (del Frate, 2011b).

One of the most important feelings associating Bignasca and Bossi is friendship. Nevertheless, Bignasca revealed his dominance over Bossi, by first showing his inflexibility and the authoritarian dimension of his narratives (the rejection of any negotiation): 'Bossi is welcome, Tremonti less. But the tax transfer [to Italy] will be blocked' (Righinetti, 2011). Second, by associating Bossi with personal threats: 'Now, things are changing. I'll talk to Bossi and if things do not go right, I'll cut the [number of Italian] cross-border workers [coming to Ticino]' (da Marco, 2011). And third, by telling him what he has to do: 'Now I will look for the [new tax] framework with Bossi. He must put in line that 'fascicle' of Tremonti' (del Frate, 2011c).

The interactions and arguments used by the other populist politicians are different, with the slight singularity of Lorenzo Quadri. This politician is more than a mere populist activist, less than a man of major public responsibility, and above all a faithful man of Bignasca who like him shows his great inflexibility concerning cross-border issues and especially the tax one. His arguments are quoted in an important number of Swiss articles (Table 2). The weight of his quotations can be related to his views. However, his visibility can also be associated to another measure of public legitimacy recognised by the press: his belonging to the professional field of journalism. Quadri, the editor in chief of *Il Mattino della Dominaca*, a right-wing free tabloid newspaper sponsored and controlled by Bignasca until his death (Albertazzi, 2007) is not only quoted by other Swiss journals, but he is also allowed to give his views in lengthy opinion articles in the key mainstream Swiss dailies, *Il Corriere del Ticino* and *TicinoNews*. He is given publicity that is far greater than his political weight. The repertoire used by him makes him the literate voice of Bignasca, using irony, interrogative sentences and technical terms. However, he also uses aggressive expressions showing the cross-border and dialogic dimension of his discourse. He remobilises for instance the famous slogan Bossi used a few years before to qualify the Italian central state power—'Roma Ladrona' ('Thieving Rome', Tarchi, 2008) to express the required readiness of Ticino to show its muscles to the Italian Republic (Bertagni, 2011).

The holders of important public offices in both leagues, whose speeches are used in the press, are less vindictive. On the Swiss side, Borradori has been known for his 'family friendly, soft style' (Ernst et al.,

2017). In parallel, the current political webpage of Norman Gobbi also emphasises the importance of family and church for him, by presenting photos of his family and a meeting with Pope Francis,<sup>8</sup> while Bignasca considered Italians were right to come to Switzerland to visit prostitutes because 'they were cheaper and cleaner than in Italy' (Ticinoline.ch, 2011). Borradori and Gobbi, two Swiss 'professional' speakers—the former a trained lawyer, and the latter a consultant in communications and marketing—insist on the legitimacy of the autonomous canton of Ticino to take decisions affecting the relationship between the Italian and Swiss Central state. They use the polite argumentation of representatives of the quasi-sovereign, state-bounded canton to justify their positions, which their Italian populist counterparts understand. Roberto Maroni, the leader of the Italian *Lega Nord* after Bossi and minister of the home office of the Italian Republic, is similar to Borradori and Gobbi. He belongs to the 'Haiderized' (Wodak, 2015, p. 2) cast of right-wing populist politicians whose antagonistic discourse is made attractive by the softening/mitigation of their argumentation. He does not use the low and aggressive narrative style of Bignasca and Bossi. The discourse of the Milan-trained lawyer is in the realm of the mainstream international interactions produced by non-populist politicians; that is, politeness, attention and the respect of a diplomatic order. Nevertheless, the regionalist dimension of Maroni was also revealed after he was no longer an Italian state minister. Most of his quotations showing support for the Swiss populist claims concerning the tax issue were produced when the *Lega Nord* fell into opposition at the national level after the collapse of the Berlusconi government. His embeddedness in the bordered and instable Italian political system determines his evolving visibility in the cross-border and regionalist discursive coalition. His attitude symbolises the chameleonic dimension of leaders associated with populist parties (Weyland, 2017). Davide Boni, the President of the Lombardy Regional Council, is eager to put in place a para-diplomatic special bond between the Italian institutions—which would secure his political legitimacy—Lombardy, and the Canton of Ticino (Manna, 2011). Galli, the president of the Varese Provincial Council whose territory is the most affected by the cross-border integration determined by the Ticino economy, also puts forward the centrality of his Italian electoral territory (the Province) in his speeches, as Boni does with Lombardy. It is their institutional duty to listen, understand and share the Swiss populist claims. Marco Giovanni Reguzzoni, the *Lega Nord* group leader in the Italian national parliament—like Quadri, his Swiss counterpart—produced a series of technical content typical of that of MPs' speeches made for the attention of their assembled colleagues. This written style is currently used in order to justify the importance of the Swiss populist position concerning the tax issue, and the necessity of the Italian central state to adapt its policy to these foreign populist claims, as they affect Reguzzoni's Italian political constituency (Silini, 2011). Party leaders, political stakeholders in charge of public institutions and populist agents

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.udc.ch/parti/personnes/detail/norman-gobbi/>.

having a key function in elected assemblies, use distinctive discursive styles as detailed by Ostiguy (2017). The low and uninhibited style is the 'privilege' of founding fathers, while the others can mix a 'high' oral or written style (by putting forward formalised, civilised and institutionalised arguments) with a series of references attached to radical right populist and regionalist parties; from the discrimination against Muslims to the scapegoating of thieving central state authorities. However, they are all complementary to building up transregional meta-populism, implying the dislocation of the current cross-border, dominating and liberal order that provides undifferentiated free movement of people within Europe and has a multi-scalar governance system based on balanced political power (Hooghe & Marks, 2003).

## 5. Conclusion: Alpine meta-populism on the 'Roman' margins and multi-scalar power Dynamics

Radical-right populism is traditionally based on a combination of three ideological backgrounds: nativism, authoritarianism and populism (Mudde, 2017). The current case study focuses on regional radical-right populist parties sharing the same functional cross-border area, and reveals that it is possible for these parties to shape a trans-regional 'meta-populism' (de Cleen, 2017, p. 356). That is, the production of discourses based on a common 'chain of equivalence' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 144), implying a complex combination of state-bounded regions and a relational space at the cross-border scale, within which nativist, authoritarian and populist narratives are produced, discussed and promoted as proved in the quotations of Bignasca, Bossi and Galli. We can talk about a trans-regional meta-populism for three main reasons associated with the organisation of power and dominance relations in a de-bordered and multi-scalar Italian-speaking space. First, the most frequent cohesive and antagonistic discourse shared by both parties involves the criticism of Rome as opposed to the two regional territories. Second, both of the radical-right populist parties can shape a cohesive cross-border discourse because of their attitude of non-aggression within the Regio Insubrica. They 1) hide their respective responsibilities in the definition of the tax crisis, 2) prevent debate about or mitigation of the campaign against Italian cross-border workers portrayed as rats, and 3) agree on a common institutionalisation and work programme for the Regio Insubrica, although this could maintain or intensify an economic and political dissymmetry between the two regions. Third, this meta-populism exists because of the readiness of the Italian *lega's* representatives to accept their position of dominated regionalists coming from a form of Alpine Mezzogiorno, economically dependent on a more northern and more developed region within the Regio Insubrica. This Swiss supremacy is visible in the construction of a cross-border populist agenda and in the use of specific styles by the different members of the cross-border polyphonic and populist ensemble. Power relations can be revealed by the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (de Cillia et al., 2013; Fairclough, 2012). CDA helps to grasp the social world imagined by populist agents and based on the needed empowerment of sovereign and pure people deprived by the corrupted elite, but it can also help in investigating the power and domination processes taking place between different populist parties. A European league of leagues is not exclusively the joyful assembly of radical-right parties claiming their alliance for a new Europe during mass rallies in capital cities, such as the one organised by Salvini in May 2019 in Milan on the doorstep of the Regio Insubrica (Giuffrida, 2019). It can be a source of context-given power dominance of one league over the others in a de-bordered European space to shape a nativist, authoritarian and populist discourse.

The power dominance between leagues always takes place in a specific spatial and temporal context. In the case of the Regio Insubrica, there can be a broader supremacy of the Italian Northern culture and its Milan metropolis over that of the Ticino, plagued with a certain provincialism (Ticinonews, 2015). However, cross-border antagonism involving economic issues secured the supremacy of the Swiss populist discourses and actions on the three chosen controversies between 2010

and 2012. The political situation and power relations in the Regio Insubrica can of course evolve. For instance, in the framework of another article, it would be interesting to examine how both leagues reacted and interacted following the 2014 Swiss popular initiative "Against Mass Immigration" affecting Italian cross-border workers. In 2019, the Lega dei Ticinesi remains a key political party in Ticino by maintaining its second position in terms of canton councilors. On the Italian side, the Lega (previously Nord) entered into a new phase of growth after 2012 with the arrival of Salvini as the leader of the party, and especially following the support of an increasing number of Italian voters for the authoritarian Interior Minister of the Conte government. One might believe that the Italian *lega* of the nationwide popular Salvini would dominate the populist agenda of the Regio Insubrica. However, a recent interview with Salvini published in *Il Corriere del Ticino* (Steinmann, 2018) shows that the Swiss authoritarian border control of immigrants, powered by the Lega dei Ticinesi, is viewed as a model by the Italian leader, who will in parallel mitigate the issue of Italian cross-border control in Switzerland; a matter still emphasized by the Swiss *lega* (Ticinonews, 2018). The attitude of Salvini tends to show that it is not the scale of territory from which the populist leaders get their political legitimacy that determines the power relations between leagues across state borders. The source of this dominance has to be searched for in the issues at stake and also in the organisation of human and capital flows within a functional space shared by populist leagues elected in different state-bordered democracies.

## Declaration of competing interest

None.

## Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Luxembourg National Research Fund (INTER/SNF/18/12618900/CROSS-POP). I would like to thank Prof. Oscar Mazzoleni (Political Sciences Department, University of Lausanne, Switzerland) for his comments concerning this research.

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