POLIDEMOS



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(edited by)

HYBRID ITALY

A Democracy amid Global Disorder

EDUCatt

DOI: 10.69117/POLIDEMOS.21.26.001

Introduction. Hybrid Italy: A Democracy amid Global Disorder

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Abstract. This introduction frames the volume's central question — what has changed in Italian democracy under the Meloni government, and in what direction — against the interpretive tradition epitomised by the Gattopardo formula, according to which everything in Italian politics must change so that everything can remain the same. It first reconstructs the long, never-completed Italian 'transition' inaugurated in the early 1990s, tracing the trajectory that transformed the country into a 'populist laboratory': from Tangentopoli and the unfreezing of the party system to the personalisation of politics inaugurated by Berlusconi, the rise of the Movimento 5 Stelle, and the tripolar configuration that emerged after the collapse of the 'Second Republic' on 12 November 2011. Engaging with competing readings of the 2022 elections — asymmetric bipolarism, persistent tripolarism, the 'single pole' thesis — the introduction proposes the formula of an 'imperfect tripolarism', echoing Giorgio Galli's classic diagnosis: a party system whose characteristics render alternation in government structurally improbable. It then assesses the government's record, marked by a paradoxical combination of exceptional stability and unrealised institutional reform, and situates it within a world in disorder: multiplying wars, the global democratic recession, the second Trump presidency, the reversal of the Meloni-Trump relationship, and the inversion of the *vincolo esterno* from external constraint into external facilitator. After presenting the six chapters — on public opinion, external

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constraints, environmental policy, the governance of dissent, and cultural politics — the introduction advances the thesis of a 'hybrid Italy': not a hybrid regime in the technical sense, but a democracy in which formal institutional continuity coexists with a cumulative illiberal drift in practices, discourse and the boundaries of legitimate dissent. Tancredi's maxim, it concludes, now runs in reverse: everything stays the same precisely so that things can change.

Keywords: Italian democracy; Meloni government; imperfect tripolarism; illiberal drift; populism.

"If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." Few sentences in European literature have captured the paradox of political transformation with such economy and such precision. It is Tancredi Salina, nephew and heir apparent of Prince Fabrizio of Salina, who pronounces these words to his uncle in the spring of 1860, as the old Bourbon order is beginning its slow, spectacular collapse. Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's *Il Gattopardo* (1958), set against the turbulent backdrop of the Risorgimento, tells the story of a Sicilian aristocracy that survives precisely by mastering the art of apparent capitulation. The Salina family does not resist change; it absorbs it, domesticates it, turns it to its own advantage. Tancredi marries the daughter of a newly enriched bourgeois, joins the nationalist forces that are dismantling the world his uncle was born into, and in doing so ensures that the leopards and the lions, as the Prince reflects in his most famous meditation, will be replaced not by lambs but by jackals and hyenas – a different kind of predator, perhaps, but one equally committed to maintaining the fundamental hierarchies of power. Italy is unified; the aristocracy endures; the South enters national history already

framed by the condescending gaze of its 'liberators', a gaze that would soon crystallise into the enduring stereotypes of the 'Southern Question' (Moe, 1992; Schneider, 1998). Everything changes; nothing does.

No phrase has entered the political vocabulary of modern Italy with greater tenacity, and few have been more systematically misused. Invoked to explain the resilience of the First Republic's party system through decades of social transformation, then deployed again to account for the curious continuities that survived its supposed collapse in the early 1990s, the Gattopardo formula has become something close to a national hermeneutic reflex – a ready-made explanation for the feeling, widespread among Italians across the political spectrum, that the country's political life is governed by a kind of structural inertia, a centripetal force that draws every apparent rupture back toward the familiar. Governments rise and fall; coalitions form and dissolve; scandal, referendum, judicial earthquake and financial crisis succeed one another with exhausting regularity – and yet the essential configurations of power, the underlying distribution of privilege and disadvantage, the chronic distance between citizens and institutions, seem to reconstitute themselves with a persistence that borders on the geological.

It is against this interpretive tradition – at once illuminating and potentially disabling – that this volume seeks to situate the government of Giorgia Meloni, in office since October 2022. The question the following chapters attempt to answer is deceptively simple: what, precisely, has changed in Italy under Meloni, and what has not? Is this a government of transformation or of continuity – or, more unsettlingly, a government that has found new ways of practising the Salinian art of consequential immobility? And if things have changed, in what direction? Is Italy witnessing the consolidation of a new conservative normalcy, broadly compatible with the institutional architecture of liberal

democracy, or the incremental construction of something more troubling – an illiberal project that proceeds not through frontal assault on democratic norms but through the patient, cumulative redefinition of their content?

These are not merely academic questions. The formation of the first Italian government led by a party with direct organisational roots in the post-fascist tradition has attracted intense scrutiny both domestically and internationally, generating responses that range from alarm to reassurance and back again. For some observers, the election of Fratelli d'Italia as the hegemonic force within the governing coalition represents a qualitative threshold in Italian democratic history – a moment after which the post-war constitutional settlement can no longer be taken for granted. For others, the government's first years in office have produced ample evidence of exactly the opposite: institutional moderation, European alignment, pragmatic adaptation to the constraints of office and the requirements of coalition management.

This volume takes neither of these positions as its starting point. It begins, rather, from the conviction that the question – what has changed in Italian democracy, and in what direction – must be disaggregated before it can be answered. Sweeping verdicts, whether apocalyptic or absolutory, tend to obscure precisely what most needs to be seen: the uneven, domain-specific, often contradictory texture of political change. The chapters collected here therefore examine the Meloni years from deliberately heterogeneous angles: the opinions of Italian citizens on democracy, peace and the international order; the government's relationship with the European Union and NATO; environmental policy as a test of democratic commitment; the governance of dissent and the right to protest; the politics of culture, media and national memory. Before presenting them, however, this introduction reconstructs the longer trajectory

within which the current political cycle must be situated. For the Italy of Giorgia Meloni is not an improvisation. It is the provisional outcome of a transition that began more than three decades ago – and that has never been completed.

1. *The long transition*

The Italian 'transition' toward a majoritarian democracy has never been accomplished. Instead of becoming a 'normal country' – whatever that expression may be taken to mean – Italy has continued to represent, if not an anomaly with respect to the trajectories of the Old Continent, at the very least a 'case': marked by elements of strong specificity, and yet also capable of anticipating tendencies and transformations destined to impose themselves on the wider European scene (Newell, 2023; Baldini, 2024). In many respects, over the last three decades Italy has in fact become a sort of 'populist paradise', as Guy Hermet (2001) once defined it – an involuntarily ironic reprise of the far older topos of Italy as 'a paradise inhabited by devils' (Croce, 2006) – or, in a formulation that has gained wide currency in the comparative literature, a 'laboratory' in which almost every conceivable declination of the 'appeal to the people' has been experimented with in turn, giving rise to a series of combinations that probably have no equal in any other democracy in the world, and certainly in none in Europe (Tarchi, 2015; Verbeek and Zaslove, 2015; Bruno, 2022; Baldini, 2024).

Thirty years ago, while judicial investigations were sweeping away the political class of the 'First Republic' and the long Italian 'transition' was beginning, all the parties that had dominated the political scene – parties that until that moment had represented themselves as the custodians of democracy –

suddenly found themselves called into question. If 'Tangentopoli' brought to light the sheer scale of the system of illicit party financing, the new international framework – with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War – seemed abruptly to 'unfreeze' the Italian political system. For more than four decades the success or failure of a party had been measured in a few percentage points lost or gained with respect to the previous elections. From that moment onwards, variations began to be measured in millions of votes conquered and squandered within the space of a few months. Above all in the regions of the North, the wind of protest had begun to blow with unforeseeable force, bringing to the surface not so much the disappointment as the rancour of society towards the political class. A rancour long held in check, but which first the regional leagues and then, above all, the Lega Nord managed to capitalise upon politically. 'Localism' brought to the surface that cleavage between centre and periphery which the mass parties had managed to contain or to govern but which, more than a hundred and thirty years after unification, still appeared profound and perhaps even unbridgeable.

The brutal oratory of Umberto Bossi – truly the opposite of that enigmatic *politichese* to which Italians had been accustomed for decades – proved, however, to be only the anticipation of a stylistic turn that would radically alter the tempo and the register of public debate. For shortly afterwards the 'descent onto the field' of Silvio Berlusconi sanctioned the full entry into the political arena of communication techniques borrowed from commercial advertising, of a language stripped of all cultural complexity, of a political offer abysmally distant from any pedagogical ambition. From then on, no political force would really have the strength to escape the logic of personalisation (Calise, 2010) and the irresistible pull towards the simplification of discourse. Beppe Grillo, Matteo Renzi, Matteo

Salvini and Giorgia Meloni herself – together with many other, more modest devotees of the rhetoric of the 'appeal to the people' – would subsequently provide the most successful examples of the long populist wave experimented in the Italian 'laboratory' over the last thirty years (Mudde, 2004; Tarchi, 2015; Diamanti and Lazar, 2018). In different ways, all of them attempted to mend the relationship with the electorate and to rebuild a bond with society, adhering as closely as possible to the language of the 'man in the street', to his 'common sense' reasoning, to the real needs of 'ordinary people'. Only Silvio Berlusconi remained in many respects an exception, because he was the only leader capable of consolidating his own reservoir of voters for almost twenty years – a longevity in office that has few parallels in the comparative record of populists in power (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015). The much-invoked 'people', for its part, has mostly continued to keep its distance from politics, sometimes deserting after only a few months the very leaders for whom it had briefly ignited with ephemeral enthusiasm, and in any case without ever forming solid ties of identification. Thus the transition was never concluded; and the long populist wave, begun with the localist revolt of the regional leagues, has continued, with alternating fortunes, for three decades – down to the present day.

The elections of 25 September 2022 marked a further stage of this endless transition, and the Italian laboratory became the theatre of a new and unprecedented experiment. A right-wing formation such as Fratelli d'Italia – in whose identity code some trace still remains of the history of Italian neo-fascism and of the memory of the Movimento Sociale Italiano (Vassallo and Vignati, 2022; Vampa, 2023; Bruno and Morini, 2026) – led its coalition to victory and opened the doors of Palazzo Chigi to the first woman President of the Council of Ministers, Giorgia Meloni. The fact that, one hundred years after the march on

Rome, the leader of a party perceived – above all abroad – as a sort of filiation of the neo-fascist tradition should have reached the head of government aroused more than a little disquiet (Broder, 2023). And more than a few observers saw in this advance, beyond the signal of a sharp rightward turn in European politics, also a threat to liberal democracy itself, whose rules, it was feared, might be swept away by the rise of anti-liberal or illiberal formations (Galli, 2024; Pedullà and Urbinati, 2024; see also Campati, 2024; Bruno, 2024).

The political science literature, for its part, has been rather more cautious than the public debate, and its hesitations are themselves instructive. Where should Fratelli d'Italia be placed on the conceptual map of the European right? For some, the party belongs unambiguously to the populist radical right family, sharing its nativism, its authoritarianism and its populism (Mudde, 2019; Vampa, 2023); for others, its trajectory in office reveals rather the physiognomy of a national-conservative party, heir to a tradition – that of the 'destra nazionale' – which has always combined ideological radicalism with a stubborn vocation for institutional respectability (Vassallo and Vignati, 2022). Others still have insisted on the dynamics of 'mainstreaming' through which a formation born at the margins of the system has normalised itself without ever fully renouncing its origins, transforming Italy from an 'anomaly' into a 'laboratory' for the study of the European right at large (Baldini, 2024; Bruno and Morini, 2026). The very difficulty of classification is significant: it registers, at the level of taxonomy, the same constitutive ambivalence – between radical identity and governmental pragmatism, between the flame in the party symbol and the reassurances offered to the markets and the chancelleries – that runs through the entire experience of the Meloni government, and that the chapters of this volume encounter, in different forms, in every policy domain they examine.

If they further strengthened the ranks of the 'Republic of the absent' (Palano, 2022a) and of the 'unrepresented' – that heterogeneous army in which the excluded, the angry and the disappointed converge (Pazè, 2024; Barbera, 2023) – the elections of September 2022, in which turnout fell below 64 per cent, the lowest figure in the history of the Republic, nonetheless delivered to the country a rather clear parliamentary majority. And they returned to government that centre-right (or right-centre) coalition which had already conquered the executive on several occasions under the leadership of Silvio Berlusconi. Partly for this reason, the electoral results may have generated the conviction that Italy had simply returned to the political configuration of the so-called 'Second Republic'. Many of the themes at the centre of public discussion – from differentiated regional autonomy to the reform of the judiciary – did indeed repropose those of the long season of confrontation between 'berlusconism' and 'anti-berlusconism'. And the political actors often gave the impression of performing an all too familiar score. But this is probably no more than an optical illusion. What we have defined – somewhat improperly – as the 'Second Republic' has in fact ceased to exist since the fateful 12 November 2011: since, that is, the government presided over by Silvio Berlusconi was forced to resign by the surge of the sovereign bond spread. Precisely then, something in the relationship between voters and parties broke; and the effects of that laceration have probably never healed. After the fall of the Berlusconi government – and after the technocratic interlude of Mario Monti, an emblematic episode of that 'democracy of the technocrats' which has periodically suspended party government in Italy (Giannone and Cozzolino, 2023) – and above all from the subsequent general elections of 2013, the Italian party system lost the bipolar configuration it had assumed in 1994. The rise of the Movimento 5 Stelle, which began precisely in the months of the sovereign debt crisis,

sanctioned the birth of an unprecedented tripolar arrangement. An arrangement that was the consequence of the capacity of the formation founded by Beppe Grillo to shatter the opposition between right and left (as well as between 'berlusconism' and 'anti-berlusconism') on which the bipolarism of the 'Second Republic' had been built – a bipolarism which, in the final analysis, had contributed to stabilising coalitions increasingly orphaned of solid party identifications (Ignazi, 2017; Ieraci, 2018).

2. *An imperfect tripolarism*

The tripolarism born in 2013 could only prove unstable, as every tripolar system must. If the elections of 2018 and the resounding success of the Five Stars confirmed the existence of three poles, the crisis of the 'yellow-green' government and the subsequent formation of the Conte II executive marked, in many respects, a turning point for the M5S. Not only because, from that moment onwards, the haemorrhage of support began to manifest itself quite clearly, but above all because the movement's capacity to intercept votes transversally with respect to the right-left axis began to wane. Fratelli d'Italia reaped the benefits of having remained the only voice of opposition to the government of national unity led by Mario Draghi in the final phase of the pandemic (on which see Palano, 2022b), in addition to the dividends of the coalition formed with the Lega and Forza Italia. But the outcome of 2022 was largely predictable above all because of what happened on the centre-left. The failure of any alliance between the three principal actors of that camp – the M5S, the Partito Democratico and the so-called 'Third Pole' formed by Azione and Italia Viva – made the victory of the right-wing coalition in the majority of the single-member constituencies provided for by the

current electoral law a near-foregone conclusion. Nonetheless, the widely announced Five Star débâcle did not materialise. The party led by Giuseppe Conte proved able to preserve a significant level of support – undoubtedly much lower than four and a half years earlier, but sufficient to affect the overall dynamic of the system (Genovese and Vassallo, 2023).

How, then, should the resulting configuration be described? Salvatore Vassallo and Luca Verzichelli (2023) – synthesising the results of a survey conducted for the Istituto Cattaneo – argue that the Italian political system is today configured by a logic of 'asymmetric bipolarism'. In the single-member constituencies, the traces of the earlier tripolarism would appear almost non-existent: while one of the two poles – that of the right (right-centre or centre-right) – is well established and rather compact, the centre-left pole is substantially absent, at least as a unitary pole. More particularly, according to Vassallo and Verzichelli, after 2019 the two-headed right composed of Fratelli d'Italia and the Lega succeeded in reconquering many voters who, having voted in the past for the 'Berlusconian' pole, had turned to the M5S in 2013 and 2018. Nothing comparable occurred on the centre-left, both because no coalition capable of contesting the adversary's victory ever took shape, and because a considerable portion of the Five Star electorate – as the Itanes (2023) survey also shows – flowed into the reservoir of abstention. It is partly for this reason that Fabio Bordignon, Luigi Ceccarini and James L. Newell (2023) maintain, by contrast, that tripolarism is far from having evaporated, and that the push towards bipolarisation experienced with the Conte II and Draghi governments was never fully accomplished. Alessandro Chiaramonte and Lorenzo De Sio (2024), radicalising the diagnosis, have gone so far as to speak of a 'single pole': a party system in which only one aggregation – the right – currently possesses the requisites of a governing coalition.

Rather than reproposing a scenario analogous to the bipolar one – albeit a 'fragmented bipolarism' – of the 1994-2011 phase, the geometry that emerged in 2022 seems perhaps best captured by the formula of an 'imperfect tripolarism'. Although with very different electoral weights, the three poles that emerged in the elections of 2013 and 2018 do in fact continue to exist. And in all probability they will continue to survive in the near future, since every hypothesis of a structured alliance between the PD and the M5S appears rather remote, by virtue of clear differences on politically crucial questions. But this tripolarism cannot but prove 'imperfect', in precisely the sense in which Giorgio Galli wrote of the 'imperfect bipartyism' of the Italy of the 1960s and 1970s (Galli, 1966): that is to say, a 'tripolarism' which, by its very characteristics, renders an alternation in government altogether improbable – and not only under the current electoral system. Just as the imperfect bipartyism of the First Republic condemned the Democrazia Cristiana to permanent government and the Partito Comunista to permanent opposition, so the imperfect tripolarism of the present seems to assign the right to the role of the natural party of government, and its divided adversaries to that of structural minorities. Beyond the formulas, moreover, the actors of the Italian political system – a system that emerged from the pandemic and now grapples with a radically changed international context, with the 'crisis of globalisation' and the 'return of the state', as well as with the consequences of the right's victory – still seem largely in search of an identity, or of a renewed identity. The defeated certainly are; but so, in their own way, are the victors: first of all Forza Italia, deprived of its founder and charismatic chief after the death of Silvio Berlusconi in June 2023, but also Matteo Salvini's Lega, oscillating between governmental respectability and movementist radicalisation, and Fratelli d'Italia itself, suspended between its origins and its new

institutional vocation. And although the orientations of right-wing voters are, at bottom, extremely coherent and compact on the salient issues, it is rather predictable that the leaderships of these parties will not miss the opportunity to find new grounds of contention (or to dust off old ones) in order to re-define identities and internal balances of power.

What remains largely an unknown is precisely the capacity of this arrangement to stabilise over time. It is to this question – and to the record of the government that the arrangement has produced – that we must now turn.

3. *Three years on: stability without reform*

The first, and in comparative terms perhaps the most striking, datum of the Meloni years is longevity. In a country that has long served as the textbook example of chronic governmental instability – with executives lasting, on average, little more than a year across the entire republican period – the government sworn in on 22 October 2022 has endured. By 2026 it ranks among the longest-lived governments in the history of the Republic, and Giorgia Meloni has consolidated a position of personal pre-eminence that none of her recent predecessors could claim. The European elections of June 2024, in which Fratelli d'Italia confirmed and slightly improved upon its 2022 result, certified the persistence of her electoral primacy; the chronic weakness of her coalition partners – a Forza Italia orphaned of its founder and a Lega in permanent search of a new *raison d'être* – has done the rest. Scholars have described the resulting configuration as a 'consolidation' of the executive and, at the same time, as a 'return to politics' after the technocratic seasons of the previous decade (Bull and Polverari, 2025): a government, that is, which is unambiguously political in its origin

and composition, and which has concentrated decision-making power in the core executive to a degree that has few precedents, governing extensively through decree-laws and confidence votes within a parliament reduced in size and, arguably, in centrality (Cavalieri, Marangoni and Vercesi, 2024; Borghetto, Improta and Marangoni, 2025).

Stability, however, is not achievement; and it is here that the Gattopardo question begins to bite. The government took office with an ambitious agenda of institutional transformation, articulated around three flagship reforms: the direct election of the prime minister (the so-called *premierato*), presented by Meloni herself as 'the mother of all reforms'; differentiated regional autonomy, the historic banner of the Lega; and the reform of the judiciary, centred on the separation of the careers of judges and prosecutors, the old battle-cry of the Berlusconian right. Three years on, the balance sheet is remarkably thin. The *premierato* has not advanced beyond a first parliamentary reading, and its path towards the qualified majorities or the confirmatory referendum required for constitutional revision appears increasingly uncertain. Differentiated autonomy, approved in June 2024, was substantially eviscerated by the Constitutional Court within months, and survives as an empty procedural shell. The reform of the judiciary has travelled further along the parliamentary road than its siblings, but at the time of writing it has yet to produce definitive constitutional change, and its ultimate fate remains suspended. A government stronger, in parliamentary and party terms, than any of its predecessors of the last three decades has thus far completed none of the institutional transformations it promised – a paradox that Tancredi would have appreciated.

The record in ordinary policy is more substantial, but hardly revolutionary. Fiscal policy has been prudent to the point of orthodoxy, in continuity with the Draghi government and under

the watchful eye of the European Commission and the financial markets; the implementation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan has absorbed much of the executive's administrative energy, as Matilde Zubani shows in this volume with regard to its environmental pillar. Employment has reached historically high levels, even as real wages have stagnated and the demographic winter has deepened. On immigration – the terrain on which the identity of the right is most heavily invested – observers have noted a striking gap between the radicalism of the discourse and the substantial continuity of the policy (Echeverría and Finotelli, 2024), with one crucial exception: the Italy-Albania protocol on the extraterritorial processing of asylum seekers, the flagship initiative whose broader significance Valerio Alfonso Bruno and Enrico Fassi reconstruct in their chapter. In foreign policy, finally, the government has pursued what has been described as a 'pragmatic' line, combining Atlantic loyalty, European engagement and Mediterranean activism (Fasola and Lucarelli, 2024) – a pragmatism that the upheavals of the international system, as we shall see in a moment, has subjected to increasingly severe stress.

If the majority has proved stable, the opposition has proved stably divided. The hypothesis of a structured alliance between the Partito Democratico of Elly Schlein and the Movimento 5 Stelle of Giuseppe Conte – the so-called *campo largo* – has been tested episodically in regional contests, with alternating outcomes, but it continues to collide with divergences that are anything but tactical: on foreign policy above all, where the pacifist and neutralist vocation of the M5S clashes with the Atlanticist and Europeanist commitments of the PD's majority wing; on economic policy; and, not least, on the question of who should lead any future coalition. The competition between Schlein and Conte for the leadership of the opposition camp is itself a structural feature of the imperfect tripolarism described above, and one of the principal reasons why alternation in government remains, in the

short term, improbable. Italian democracy thus finds itself in a paradoxical condition: more stable than at any time in recent memory at the level of government, and yet deprived of that realistic prospect of alternation which, in the classic accounts, constitutes one of the essential requisites of democratic competition.

Nor should the solidity of the government be mistaken for a reconciliation between Italians and their political system. The survey data analysed in the opening chapter of this volume tell a very different story: a majority of respondents considers Italian democracy so compromised as to require alternative ways of governing the country; distrust of the political class reaches four citizens out of five; two thirds believe that politics has lost any real purchase on a world governed by economic and financial powers. The stability of the executive, in other words, rests upon a participatory base that continues to shrink – the 'Republic of the absent' has not stopped growing since 2022 – and upon an opinion climate in which resignation counts for at least as much as consensus. Giorgia Meloni's own communicative strategy, built around the figure of the perpetual 'underdog' doing battle against hostile establishments at home and abroad, is itself a symptom of this configuration: a government that commands the strongest parliamentary position in three decades continues to narrate itself as an opposition, because it knows that the anti-political sentiment from which it drew its victory has not been absorbed but merely, and provisionally, redirected. Whether such a foundation can sustain not merely a legislature but a hegemony is one of the open questions of the coming years.

4. *A world in disorder*

The difficulties of Italian democracy have been aggravated – and in part reshaped – by a world in disorder. The international

environment within which the Meloni government has operated bears little resemblance to that of any of its predecessors. War returned to Europe with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022; the Middle East was set ablaze by the attacks of 7 October 2023 and by the devastating conflict that followed in Gaza; and the spiral of escalation eventually reached Iran, dragging the region – and with it the world economy – into a crisis whose outcome remains, at the time of writing, radically uncertain. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2024 registered sixty-one state-based conflicts worldwide, the highest number since 1945 – a figure that the contributors to this volume's opening chapter rightly treat as the emblem of a change of epoch. At the same time, the global democratic recession, now nearly two decades old, has continued to deepen: the vocabulary of 'democratic backsliding' (Bermeo, 2016), of 'hybrid regimes' and 'competitive authoritarianism' (Diamond, 2002; Levitsky and Way, 2010), of 'illiberalism' (Laruelle, 2022), once reserved for the peripheries of the democratic world, is now routinely applied to its historic core (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018).

The decisive rupture, however, has come from the other shore of the Atlantic. The return of Donald Trump to the White House in January 2025 has radically changed the coordinates within which every European government must operate. The second Trump administration has combined an aggressively transactional trade policy – with tariffs that have struck hard at European and Italian exports – with the open dismantling of the apparatus of international democracy promotion, an explicitly sovereigntist national security doctrine, and an unprecedented willingness to intervene in the domestic politics of allied countries in support of ideologically congenial 'patriotic parties'. The crisis of the liberal international order, long diagnosed by scholars (Ikenberry, 2018; Lucarelli, 2020; Parsi, 2021), has thus

entered a qualitatively new phase: the order's erstwhile guarantor has become the principal agent of its demolition.

For Giorgia Meloni, this rupture has had a paradoxical trajectory. At the outset, the Italian prime minister appeared to be the European leader best placed to profit from it: ideologically closer to the new administration than any of her major counterparts, she was the only head of government of a large EU member state to attend the January 2025 inauguration, and was widely tipped as the natural 'bridge' between Washington and Brussels. Over time, however, the relationship has effectively reversed. The tariff offensive spared Italy no more than its neighbours; Washington's pressure for dramatic increases in defence spending collided with an Italian public opinion two-thirds of which, as the surveys analysed in this volume document, opposes rearmament in any form; the administration's unilateral turns – culminating in the Iranian crisis of 2026 – left Rome, like the rest of Europe, in the position of spectator; and the overt American sponsorship of Europe's sovereigntist right transformed ideological proximity from an asset into a source of embarrassment, exposing Meloni to the accusation of complicity with a power now openly hostile to the European Union of which Italy is a founding member. The erstwhile privileged interlocutor has found herself squeezed between Atlantic loyalty, European solidarity and a domestic opinion whose confidence in the American ally has collapsed – from a net balance of +47 in the 2020-2022 period to +19 in 2025, according to the data discussed by Enrico Bianchi in this volume. Nor is the resulting cleavage merely external: the tension between Atlanticism and sovereignism now runs *within* the Italian right itself, dividing a Lega openly sympathetic to the Trumpian international from a Fratelli d'Italia anchored, at least officially, to institutional responsibility.

There is, finally, a subtler sense in which the world's disorder has penetrated the texture of Italian democracy – and it concerns the fate of that 'external constraint' (*vincolo esterno*) which for decades functioned as the invisible regulator of Italian politics. The genealogy of the notion is well known (Diodato, 2014; Diodato and Marchetti, 2023). From the divorce between the Treasury and the Bank of Italy through the Maastricht convergence criteria, from the entry into the single currency to the technocratic rescues of 2011 and 2021, Italian elites have repeatedly and deliberately used international commitments as a substitute for the reforming capacity that the domestic political system lacked: what could not be imposed in the name of the national interest was imposed in the name of Europe. In the classic account, Italy's international memberships – the European Community and then Union, NATO, the disciplines of the single currency – thus operated simultaneously as an external engine of modernisation and as a moderating harness on whichever radical forces reached government: a mechanism whose ambivalence – discipline experienced as heteronomy – has itself been one of the deep sources of the populist resentment of the last three decades. One of the central theses to emerge from this volume, articulated most systematically in the chapter by Bruno and Fassi, is that this mechanism has not simply weakened: it has inverted. Under conditions of eroding normative consensus within the supranational institutions themselves, the external constraint has become an 'external facilitator' – a resource that a radical-right government can strategically instrumentalise, obtaining European legitimation for its own policy innovations and projecting them outward in a process of 'reverse Europeanisation' of which the Albania model of migration externalisation is the clearest illustration. The disorder of the world, in other words,

is not merely the backdrop against which Italian democracy evolves; it is an active ingredient of its transformation.

5. *The chapters*

The six chapters that compose this volume approach these questions from distinct but converging directions. The volume opens with the contribution of Chiara Ancillotti, Antonio Campati and Elia Montani, which presents and analyses the findings of the third wave of the Observatory on the State of Democracy, the survey conducted by Polidemos with Ipsos Doxa on a representative sample of the Italian population. The picture that emerges is one of profound dissatisfaction without desertion: a majority of Italians believes that their democracy functions badly and that politics has been dispossessed by economic and financial powers, and distrust of the political class and the media reaches imposing levels; and yet only a minority would trade democracy for an efficient authoritarian alternative, while a plurality identifies the remedy for democracy's ills in *more* democracy – referendums, participation, direct engagement – and favours gradual reform over radical rupture. The chapter also probes the relationship between democracy and peace, registering both the persistence of the Wilsonian conviction that a world of democracies would be a more peaceful world and the significant diffusion – especially on the right of the political spectrum – of a more disenchanted view, for which peaceful coexistence with non-democratic regimes is possible and perhaps inevitable. The authors' conclusion – neither defeatism nor naïve optimism – could serve as the epigraph of the entire volume.

The second chapter, by Enrico Bianchi, returns to public opinion, reconstructing the collective mood of Italians in the

face of the international turbulence of 2025 through a reasoned triangulation of the major national surveys. The pattern he identifies – widespread anxiety, a marked recalibration of perceived friends and threats, neutralist leanings on both Ukraine and the Middle East, pragmatic but cost-averse support for NATO and European defence, and an entrenched refusal of rearmament – is interpreted through the lens of classical political realism, and in particular through Edward Hallett Carr's interwar meditation on the tension between realism and utopia. Italians emerge from his analysis as 'utopian realists': prudent, disillusioned, allergic to universalistic narratives and inclined to shift burdens onto others, yet stubbornly attached to the aspiration for peace – an ambivalence that, as Bianchi notes, uncomfortably echoes the European public moods of the 1930s that Carr himself diagnosed without foreseeing their outcome.

The third chapter, by Valerio Alfonso Bruno and Enrico Fassi, develops the theoretical argument already anticipated: the transformation of the 'external constraint' into an 'external facilitator'. Through a theory-building case study of the Meloni government – a 'least likely' case, given Italy's historic dependence on external discipline – the authors reconstruct the three-stage process (external constraint, contested constraint, external facilitator) and the three mechanisms (pragmatic adaptation, legitimation, policy projection) through which a populist radical-right government can turn the institutions of the liberal order into instruments of its own consolidation. The governing formula they identify – a 'pragmatic ambivalence' that combines punctilious international conformity with domestic radicalism – and the trajectory of the Albania model, from denounced anomaly to celebrated European template, together constitute perhaps the most consequential analytical claim of the volume: that the moderating power of

Europe over Italy's radical right can no longer be assumed, because Europe itself has changed.

With the fourth chapter, by Matilde Zubani, the volume turns to the analysis of specific policy domains. Environmental policy, Zubani argues, constitutes a particularly demanding test of democratic commitment, because its intertemporal structure – concentrated short-term costs, diffuse long-term benefits – exposes governments to the classic dilemma of time inconsistency. Her reconstruction of the Meloni government's environmental record shows neither open retrenchment nor faithful implementation, but a subtler pattern: formal commitments maintained, substantive content progressively reshaped through the revision of the recovery plan, the polemical reframing of the European Green Deal, and the redefinition of energy priorities – a strategy of conflict avoidance that manages distributive tensions by reducing their visibility, at the cost of transparency and democratic accountability. The chapter thus identifies a form of change that the Gattopardo lens is peculiarly suited to miss: transformation *within* formally unchanged commitments.

The fifth chapter, by Margherita Farinella, addresses what is perhaps the most sensitive terrain of all: the governance of dissent. Surveying the protest waves that have traversed Italy in recent years – labour conflicts, climate activism, feminist mobilisations, prison revolts, and above all the great pro-Palestinian mobilisations that followed the war in Gaza – Farinella reconstructs the legislative response of the Meloni government, centred on the security decrees of 2025 and 2026, which have introduced new criminal offences targeting road blockades, passive resistance and prison protest, and have been denounced by constitutional scholars, international monitors and civil society organisations as a systematic restriction of the right to peaceful assembly. Her analysis of governmental discourse during the Global Sumud Flotilla affair shows how the delegitimisation of protesters – recast as

irresponsible, seditious or complicit with terrorism – has accompanied and justified the legislative turn. Whether this repressive escalation threatens the foundations of Italian democracy, or will instead catalyse new and broader coalitions of dissent, is the open question on which the chapter closes.

The sixth chapter, by Valerio Moccia, completes the picture with an analysis of cultural policy, media governance and symbolic politics. Examining the governance of the Ministry of Culture, the controversies surrounding RAI – from the 'TeleMeloni' polemics to the Scurati affair – the contested Futurism exhibition, the appointments at the Venice Biennale and the emblematic ban on cultivated meat, Moccia argues that the Meloni years have been characterised more by discursive transformation than by institutional rupture: the normative pillars of Italian cultural governance remain intact, but culture has become an explicit battlefield, the terrain on which a right long persuaded – in a paradoxically Gramscian key – of the primacy of cultural hegemony now conducts its metapolitical offensive from within the state. Against this offensive, Moccia identifies in the structural pluralism of the Italian cultural system – autonomous universities, independent publishing, regional networks, European constraints – a decisive resource of democratic resilience: the hegemony has been attempted, not achieved.

6. *Hybrid Italy*

How, then, has Italian democracy changed? Are we closer to an illiberal democracy – or has everything changed so that everything could remain the same? The honest answer, and the thesis of this volume, is: both at once. And it is precisely this coexistence of stasis and drift that the formula of a *hybrid Italy* is intended to capture.

A terminological clarification is indispensable. 'Hybrid' is not used here in the technical sense established by the literature on 'hybrid regimes' and 'competitive authoritarianism' (Diamond, 2002; Levitsky and Way, 2010). Italy is not a hybrid regime, and nothing in this volume suggests otherwise: elections remain free and competitive, the opposition operates without hindrance, the Constitutional Court strikes down government legislation, the press – for all its structural fragilities – investigates and denounces, and the government itself has repeatedly bowed to judicial and European constraints. By every comparative indicator, Italian democracy remains a liberal democracy. The hybridity in question is of a different order: it designates the coexistence, within a formally intact democratic framework, of two apparently contradictory truths about the Meloni years – and the inadequacy of any account that acknowledges only one of them.

The first truth is the truth of continuity. The government has completed none of the institutional reforms it promised; the constitutional architecture is unchanged; economic policy has been orthodox; European membership has not been questioned but embraced; the cultural counter-hegemony has been proclaimed rather than constructed; even in immigration policy, the daily practice has often contradicted the roar of the discourse. Whoever expected – or feared – a regime change has been refuted by the facts. On this ledger, the Gattopardo reading seems vindicated: a political class of post-fascist origin has been absorbed, domesticated and normalised by the institutions it promised to transform, exactly as Tancredi was absorbed by the Kingdom of Italy he had fought to create.

The second truth is the truth of change – and it is the more insidious of the two, because it does not take the form that the alarmed observers of 2022 anticipated. Italian democracy has shifted towards its illiberal side, not through the demolition of

institutions but through the cumulative redefinition of practices, boundaries and expectations. The right to protest has been substantially narrowed by the security decrees, to the point of prompting the downgrading of Italy's civic space by international monitors. The externalisation of migration control, born as a contested anomaly, has been legitimised and Europeanised, dragging the normative boundaries of the entire Union along with it. Public broadcasting has been subjected to a political pressure that, while not unprecedented in kind, has been unprecedented in explicitness. Environmental commitments have been hollowed out behind formally unchanged façades, attenuating democratic accountability. The perimeter of legitimate dissent, the tone of public discourse, the treatment of critics and minorities – all have moved, and moved in the same direction. None of these displacements, taken singly, amounts to a rupture; taken together, they compose a trajectory. It is the same lesson that the comparative literature on democratic backsliding has drawn from very different contexts: contemporary democracies rarely die of coups; they are eroded, incrementally and often legally, from within (Bermeo, 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018).

Against this trajectory, however, stand the resources of resilience that the chapters of this volume also document: a public opinion that, for all its disenchantment, refuses to trade democracy away and demands more participation rather than less; a Constitutional Court that has already demonstrated its willingness to dismantle flagship legislation; a cultural and social pluralism too fragmented and too rooted to be captured by any single project; a European framework that, however ambivalent its recent evolution, still sets limits that no Italian government can ignore. Whether these anchors will hold – whether the illiberal drift of these years will consolidate into durable results or

dissipate with the political cycle that produced it – is a question that no honest observer can answer today.

Much depends on what 'durable' is taken to mean. Policies can be reversed by an alternation in government: security decrees can be repealed, broadcasting boards renewed, migration protocols allowed to lapse. Changes in the deep grammar of a democracy – in the precedents that define what a government may permissibly do, in the expectations that citizens entertain towards dissent, in the boundaries of the sayable – are another matter: they tend to survive the governments that introduce them, because the successors inherit the enlarged powers along with the office. And here the two theses of this introduction converge in a single, uncomfortable observation. The imperfect tripolarism described above makes alternation improbable; the improbability of alternation means that even formally reversible changes may, in practice, never be reversed. The mechanism that in consolidated democracies converts illiberal episodes into parentheses – the arrival in office of an opposition with an interest in undoing them – is precisely the mechanism that the current configuration of the Italian party system has suspended. The fragility of Italian democracy today lies less in the strength of its government than in the weakness of its alternative.

What can be said is this: we should not believe that nothing has changed. The most seductive error that the Gattopardo tradition makes available to Italian political culture is the alibi of immobility – the comfortable conviction that, since everything always returns to the same point, nothing that happens really matters. The evidence assembled in this volume suggests, on the contrary, that Tancredi's maxim is today being run in reverse. In the novel, everything had to change so that everything could stay the same. In the hybrid Italy of these years, everything is staying the same – the institutions, the rituals, the formulas, the

reassuring continuity of the façade – precisely so that things can change. It is in that quiet, patient, deniable change, and not in the spectacular rupture that never came, that the fate of Italian democracy in a world in disorder is being decided.

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"If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." Tancredi's celebrated maxim in *The Leopard* has long served as the master key to Italian politics: a country where every rupture seems to dissolve into continuity, every revolution into restoration. But does the formula still hold?

Since October 2022, Italy has been governed by the first executive in the history of the Republic led by a party with roots in the post-fascist tradition — an experiment watched with alarm, curiosity and hope across Europe and beyond. Three years on, the balance sheet confounds both the catastrophists and the reassured. The most stable government in decades has completed none of the institutional reforms it promised; yet Italian democracy has quietly shifted — in the governance of dissent, the control of public media, the externalisation of migration, the symbolic politics of culture and memory.

Drawing on original survey research and in-depth analyses of foreign policy, environmental commitments, protest and cultural institutions, this volume charts the transformation of Italian democracy within a world in disorder: multiplying wars, a deepening global democratic recession, a transatlantic alliance in turmoil. Its thesis is captured in a single formula: hybrid Italy — a democracy in which institutional continuity and illiberal drift coexist, and in which Tancredi's maxim now runs in reverse. Everything stays the same, precisely so that things can change.

A book for anyone seeking to understand not only where Italy is going, but what its 'laboratory' reveals about the future of democracy in Europe.

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HYBRID ITALY
A Democracy amid Global Disorder

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dell'Università Cattolica
Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milano - tel. 02.7234.22.35 - fax 02.80.53.215
e-mail: editoriale.dsu@educatt.it (produzione);
librario.dsu@educatt.it (distribuzione)
web: libri.educatt.online
ISBN: 979-12-5535-607-3



euro 14,00