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Between Hegemony and Resilience. Cultural Institutions, Media Governance and Symbolic Politics in Meloni's Italy

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Abstract. This article examines the cultural policies pursued by the Meloni government since October 2022, arguing that the period is characterised more by discursive transformation and symbolic politics than by institutional rupture or systematic legislative reform. Drawing on analysis of governance decisions, ministerial appointments, legislative adjustments and public controversies across the main domains of Italian cultural policy — the Ministry of Culture, public broadcasting, cultural heritage, audiovisual regulation and cultural diplomacy — the article shows that the key normative pillars of Italian cultural governance, from the Cultural Heritage Code of 2004 to the Cinema and Audiovisual Law of 2016 and the RAI governance reform of 2015, have remained substantially intact. The most significant changes introduced by the administration are located not at the institutional level but at the symbolic and discursive one: cultural heritage, national history, artistic traditions and even food culture have been mobilised as components of a broader narrative about Italian civilisational identity, while governance decisions — from appointments in internationally visible artistic organisations to controversies surrounding RAI's editorial practices — have transformed the cultural sector into one of the most visible arenas of political conflict. The article situates these developments within the longer historical trajectory of the Italian right's metapolitical strategy, as theorised from the 1970s

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onwards in dialogue with Gramscian theories of cultural hegemony. It further argues that the structural pluralism of the Italian cultural system — constituted by autonomous universities, independent publishing, regional networks and private foundations, and constrained by European regulatory frameworks — represents a significant source of democratic resilience. The Meloni government has not produced a new cultural hegemony; it has, however, rendered cultural policy a more explicit site of ideological contestation within Italian democratic politics.

Keywords: cultural policy; Meloni government; symbolic politics; media governance; Italian right.

1. *Cultural Policy as a Political Arena*

The formation of the government led by Giorgia Meloni in October 2022 marked a significant moment in Italian politics, not only because it represented the first time a party with roots in the post-fascist right became the hegemonic force within a governing coalition (Newell, 2023), but also because it brought renewed attention to the role of cultural policy within democratic governance. While this policy field has historically been considered a secondary field within political science compared to economic policy or institutional reform (Gray, 2007), the early years of the Meloni government demonstrate how cultural institutions can become central arenas of ideological competition and symbolic politics[2] – a dynamic characterised, as this article argues, more by discursive transformation than by institutional rupture.

[2] Recent scholarship – building on the comparative framework developed for populist radical right parties more broadly (Mudde, 2007) – has explicitly examined Fratelli d'Italia as a potential case of illiberal governance within Western Europe, raising questions about the party's trajectory in relation to institutional autonomy and democratic norms (Baldini, 2024).

In Italy, the relationship between culture and political power has long been structurally embedded in the organisation of the state. Cultural heritage protection has been a core function of public administration since the early twentieth century, culminating in the comprehensive framework established by the *Codice dei beni culturali e del paesaggio* (Repubblica Italiana, 2004). This legislation defines the legal regime governing cultural heritage and establishes the Ministry of Culture's authority to protect historical monuments, museums, and archaeological sites. The Italian state, therefore, exercises one of the most extensive heritage protection systems in Europe (Valeri, 2022, p. 5). At the same time, cultural governance in Italy operates within a complex institutional structure involving national, regional and local authorities. Administrative decentralisation reforms implemented during the 1990s and early 2000s redistributed significant responsibilities to regional administrations, particularly for cultural promotion and cultural industries policies. As a result, cultural policy in Italy has evolved into a hybrid system combining centralised heritage protection with decentralised cultural development strategies[3].

Although this legislative architecture – including the *Disciplina del cinema e dell'audiovisivo* (Repubblica Italiana, 2016), which reorganised public funding for audiovisual production – predates the Meloni government, it forms the institutional foundation upon which subsequent policy decisions have been built. Rather than radically restructuring the existing policy framework, the

[3] The implementation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) has further complicated this multi-level architecture, introducing a two-level governance space in which European timetables and national political dynamics shape cultural funding decisions (Bressanelli & Natali, 2025; Di Mascio, et al., 2025).

Meloni administration appears to have largely operated within these institutional parameters while introducing targeted adjustments to regulatory mechanisms and governance structures (Moury & Pritoni, 2024; Genovese & Vassallo, 2023).

The political significance of cultural policy under the Meloni executive cannot be understood solely in administrative terms. As scholars have demonstrated, cultural governance typically encompasses both intrinsic cultural objectives and wider political and economic functions (Throsby, 2010), making it a particularly sensitive arena for ideological contestation. Cultural institutions play a central role in shaping public discourse, national identity and historical memory. As scholars of media systems have demonstrated, the cultural sphere is a crucial component of the democratic public sphere (Couldry, 2012; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Consequently, cultural policy decisions often acquire symbolic importance beyond their immediate administrative implications. The Italian state's relationship with culture has historically oscillated between centralised control and pluralistic fragmentation, with each political transition reconfiguring the terms of this relationship (Valeri, 2022, pp. 7-14).

The ideological dimension of cultural policy has become particularly visible in debates surrounding the intellectual trajectory of the contemporary Italian right. Conservative political discourse frequently emphasises the idea that major cultural organisations have historically been dominated by progressive intellectual traditions. This perception has informed a metapolitical strategy aimed at influencing cultural narratives and intellectual debates in order to reshape ideological landscapes (Ferrini, 2023; Renzi, 2025). Cultural policy thus becomes a strategic terrain of political competition. Political actors seek to influence cultural institutions, media

discourse, and intellectual networks to redefine the contested boundaries of national identity.[4] In practice, the government's engagement with culture has largely taken the form of incremental adjustments, leadership appointments and symbolic initiatives rather than comprehensive legislative reforms.

2. *Governance of the Ministry of Culture*

Within Italy's institutional architecture, the Ministry of Culture (*Ministero della Cultura, MiC*) functions as the principal state body responsible for heritage protection, museum management, audiovisual policy and the supervision of numerous cultural foundations. Its organisational structure has evolved significantly over the past decade through a series of administrative reforms aimed at improving efficiency and decentralising museum governance (Alfano, et al., 2023).

When the Meloni government took office in October 2022, the ministry was assigned to Gennaro Sangiuliano, a journalist

[4] Similar dynamics have been observed in other European political contexts where debates about national culture and historical memory play a central role in ideological competition (Mudde, 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Comparative scholarship on right-wing sovereignism within the European Union has conceptualised these patterns as part of a broader strategy in which national governments reassert cultural sovereignty against supranational frameworks, with direct implications for the governance of cultural and media institutions (Fabbrini & Zgaga, 2023). However, the Italian political system imposes important constraints on governmental authority in the cultural sector. Constitutional safeguards, judicial oversight and supranational governance structures – particularly within the European Union – limit the capacity of governments to implement radical institutional transformations.

and former director of the RAI news programme *TG2*[5]. Many observers interpreted his appointment as a signal that cultural policy would play a visible role during the XIX legislature. Sangiuliano frequently framed his ministerial agenda in terms of promoting national culture and strengthening Italy's cultural identity. In several public speeches, he argued that Italian culture should be rebalanced to reflect ideological pluralism. This narrative reflected a wider ideological discourse within conservative political circles, consistent with the metapolitical strategy discussed above.

Despite this rhetorical emphasis on cultural transformation, the ministry's administrative actions largely involved incremental institutional adjustments. The government introduced modifications to the internal organisation of the ministry – notably through DPCM No. 167/2023 (Repubblica Italiana, 2023a) and DPCM No. 57/2024 (Repubblica Italiana, 2024), which replaced the previous structure of twelve directorates-general with four departments – and strengthened oversight mechanisms in several policy areas, particularly those concerning audiovisual subsidies and heritage management. These interventions operated within a governance structure already transformed by earlier reforms, including the 2014 Franceschini museum reform, which had granted managerial autonomy to thirty-two state museums and proved effective in increasing both visitors and revenue (Alfano, et al., 2023).

However, the ministry's leadership itself became the subject of political controversy in 2024. Sangiuliano resigned following a scandal related to the attempted appointment of a personal acquaintance as an unpaid adviser. The episode generated

[5] Sangiuliano's background combined journalism with longstanding proximity to conservative political circles. His appointment was widely covered in Italian cultural media (Nastro, 2022; Exibart, 2022).

extensive media coverage (Il Post, 2024) and raised questions about governance practices within the ministry. Following his resignation, Alessandro Giuli was appointed Minister of Culture. Giuli had previously served as president of the MAXXI Foundation, the institution responsible for managing Rome's National Museum of 21st-Century Arts. His appointment reinforced critics' perception that Meloni was seeking to consolidate her influence over cultural institutions by selecting figures associated with conservative intellectual networks. Nevertheless, the transition between ministers did not produce a radical shift in policy orientation, confirming the pattern of institutional continuity that characterises the government's overall cultural agenda.

3. *Public Broadcasting, Media Governance and Political Controversy*

Public broadcasting has long been one of the most politically sensitive areas of Italian cultural policy. The governance structure of *RAI – Radiotelevisione Italiana*, the national public broadcaster, reflects a system historically characterised by strong political influence. The institutional framework regulating RAI is primarily defined by Law No. 220/2015 (Repubblica Italiana, 2015), which reorganised the broadcaster's governance and redefined the procedures for appointing its leadership.

The law established a system in which the board of directors is partly appointed by parliament and partly by the government, creating a hybrid structure intended to balance political accountability with institutional independence. However, this arrangement has often been criticised for exposing public broadcasting to political pressures, with D'Arma (2019) characterising RAI as a troubled public service

broadcaster in a troubled country, documenting persistent challenges including political appointments through the *lottizzazione* system[6], editorial interference and declining public trust. Scholarly analysis of the Italian media debate has shown that the concept of pluralism itself – the dominant normative value invoked to justify RAI's governance structure – has historically been conceptually contested, with at least three mutually incompatible conceptions co-existing in political and institutional discourse (Hanretty, 2010). Media Pluralism Monitor reports have provided systematic evidence of Italy's elevated risks to media pluralism compared to other EU member states, with concerns about ownership concentration and regulatory independence (Vigevani, et al., 2025). Within the wider comparative framework of media systems, Italy has been classified as belonging to the *polarised pluralist* model, characterised by strong political parallelism between media organisations and political parties (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), a dynamic that Mancini (2012) further analysed as a form of instrumentalisation of the Italian media. Debates about media governance are therefore not unique to the current legislature; they are a structural feature of the Italian media system.

Nevertheless, the first years of the Meloni administration saw a significant intensification of political controversy surrounding RAI. In 2023, the broadcaster underwent a leadership change, with Roberto Sergio appointed Chief Executive Officer and Giampaolo Rossi appointed Director

[6] The term *lottizzazione* refers to the practice of dividing posts and editorial responsibilities within RAI among the main political parties in proportion to their parliamentary strength. Though widely criticised as a form of political colonisation of public media, it has also been defended as a second-best mechanism for ensuring pluralism in a politically fragmented society (Mancini, 2009).

General[7]. Rossi, in particular, attracted considerable attention due to his intellectual background and his public association with conservative cultural circles. Opposition parties and several journalists expressed concern that the appointments could transform the broadcaster's editorial orientation. Critics argued that the government might attempt to consolidate influence over public broadcasting by reshaping leadership positions and editorial management. Public debate surrounding these developments gave rise to the expression *TeleMeloni*, widely used by commentators to describe the perceived alignment between the broadcaster and the governing coalition[8]. One episode that intensified the controversy occurred in April 2024, when a monologue by the writer Antonio Scurati, scheduled to be broadcast on Liberation Day, was reportedly cancelled shortly before transmission. The segment addressed the historical legacy of fascism in Italy, and its cancellation generated widespread debate regarding editorial autonomy[9]. Additional controversies concerned programming

[7] The appointments were approved by the RAI board on 15 May 2023, following the resignation of the previous CEO Carlo Fuortes, who cited political interference. The journalists' union Usigrai described the process as an 'unprecedented attempt to politically occupy the company' (FNSI, 2023).

[8] The term first appeared in *la Repubblica* on 9 May 2023 (Vitale, 2023). It has since entered common usage and was registered in the Treccani dictionary of neologisms (Treccani, 2024) as a polemical expression denoting the perceived transformation of RAI into a broadcaster serving the interests of Giorgia Meloni and her government.

[9] The cancellation of Scurati's monologue, which explicitly criticised Meloni's party for its post-fascist roots, was widely reported in the Italian and international press. RAI declared the cancellation was motivated by an economic disagreement over fees, but the timing – on the eve of Italy's Liberation Day (25 April) – fuelled accusations of censorship (Granato, 2024). The subsequent journalists' strike on 6 May 2024 was described by the National Press Federation as a response to 'unprecedented' government interference.

decisions and editorial practices within RAI. For instance, a television broadcast of a speech delivered by the Minister of Culture Sangiuliano at a literary festival drew criticism when it appeared to remove audience boos and replace them with applause. Although RAI denied direct responsibility for the edit, the incident reinforced concerns about political sensitivity in media coverage involving government officials. These episodes illustrate how, under Meloni, the structural tension between political oversight and editorial independence – a longstanding feature of the Italian media system – acquired heightened visibility without producing formal institutional change. While accusations of political influence over RAI have historically affected governments across the political spectrum (Mancini, 2012), the symbolic importance of public broadcasting in shaping political discourse has made these controversies particularly visible.

At the European level, the debate surrounding media governance has also been influenced by the adoption of the *European Media Freedom Act* (European Union, 2024). The regulation aims to establish common standards for media independence across the European Union, including provisions designed to protect editorial autonomy and limit political interference in public media institutions (Dragomir, et al., 2024). Although the regulation applies to all member states, it has intensified scrutiny of national media governance practices[10].

[10] Scholarly analyses of the EMFA emphasise its provisions concerning transparency requirements, independence standards for public service media, and protections against political interference, which could address longstanding Italian media governance challenges if effectively implemented (Klimkiewicz, 2023).

4. *Cultural Heritage Policy and Symbolic Politics*

Cultural heritage policy is another key domain in which the government has articulated its cultural agenda. Italy possesses one of the world's most extensive cultural patrimonies, and heritage protection has long been central to national cultural policy. The legal framework governing heritage protection is defined primarily by the *Codice dei beni culturali e del paesaggio* (Repubblica Italiana, 2004), which establishes the state's responsibility for safeguarding cultural assets and regulating their use. Within this framework, the Ministry of Culture exercises authority over museums, archaeological sites and historical monuments. However, heritage policy has increasingly become intertwined with debates about national identity and historical memory. Under this administration, public discourse surrounding cultural heritage has frequently emphasised the symbolic importance of Italian civilisation and its role within European cultural history. Government officials have framed heritage protection as both an administrative responsibility and a political project aimed at strengthening national identity. Comparative scholarship on memory politics in post-fascist contexts has shown how far-right parties in power deploy mnemonic strategies to reshape public history, museums and heritage education, contributing to a conservative framing of national belonging (Ortiz Cabrero & Sierp, 2025).

One example of the political sensitivity of heritage policy emerged in debates surrounding *Il Tempo del Futurismo*, a major exhibition dedicated to Italian Futurism organised at the *Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea* in Rome in

December 2024[11]. The exhibition, curated by Gabriele Simongini and promoted and financed by the Ministry of Culture, was conceived to mark the eightieth anniversary of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's death. Futurism played an important role in the development of modernist aesthetics but was also historically linked to nationalist political movements and to aspects of fascist cultural ideology. The exhibition sought to reassess Futurism as a foundational artistic movement within Italian cultural history. However, critics argued that the initiative risked celebrating a controversial movement without sufficiently addressing its political context: excluded members of the original scientific committee accused the government of promoting a celebratory vision of Futurism that minimised its problematic ties to fascism, and international commentators described the exhibition as an ideologically oriented narrative (Angelucci, 2024). Supporters rejected these accusations, maintaining that Futurism should be evaluated primarily in terms of its artistic significance rather than its political associations, and the curator himself argued that the exhibition deliberately focused on aesthetic and technological dimensions to prevent Futurism from being reduced to its political affiliations (De Feo, 2025). The debate thus reveals the extent to which cultural heritage initiatives can become entangled in broader disputes over historical interpretation and national identity.

[11] The exhibition was originally initiated under Minister Sangiuliano and inaugurated under his successor Giuli, who described it as 'a celebration of revolution'. Its organisation was marked by significant controversies, including the dismissal and replacement of the original scientific committee and the withdrawal of several planned loans (Ioppolo, 2024).

5. *Audiovisual Policy and the Regulation of Cultural Industries*

Beyond heritage protection and media governance, the cultural policies of the Meloni government also extend to the regulation of cultural industries, particularly the audiovisual sector. As noted earlier, the institutional architecture governing film production in Italy is largely defined by Law No. 220/2016 (Repubblica Italiana, 2016), which introduced a comprehensive system of public funding and fiscal incentives for audiovisual production, including automatic funding mechanisms, selective grants, and tax credits designed to support film production, distribution, and exhibition. These incentives have played a major role in revitalising the Italian audiovisual industry and attracting international productions to Italy. In the area of video-on-demand regulation, Italy's adoption of European works quotas in 2023 reflected broader EU regulatory trends. This approach continued a pattern already documented in earlier Italian audiovisual policy, in which legacy stakeholder groups – particularly domestic broadcasters – exerted significant influence over quota implementation, while platform industry interests remained comparatively marginalised in the regulatory process (D'Arma & Gangemi, 2021).

However, the expansion of the tax credit system has also generated concerns regarding the sustainability of public spending. Under Sangiuliano, the Ministry of Culture initiated a revision of the tax credit framework aimed at strengthening oversight mechanisms and reducing potential abuses. In 2023 and 2024, new regulatory measures introduced stricter eligibility criteria for production companies seeking access to tax

incentives[12]. The reforms also strengthened auditing procedures to ensure that subsidies were allocated to genuinely productive projects. Ministerial representatives argued that these changes were necessary to prevent speculative behaviour and to guarantee the efficient use of public funds.

At the same time, the government continued to support major investments in audiovisual infrastructure financed through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), implemented under EU Regulation (EU) 2021/241 (European Union, 2021). One of the most significant initiatives concerns the expansion and modernisation of Cinecittà studios in Rome, a project designed to enhance Italy's capacity to host international film productions[13]. The Cinecittà investment programme includes the construction of new sound stages, the modernisation of production facilities and the expansion of digital production infrastructure. These initiatives reflect an overall strategy to strengthen Italy's position in global audiovisual markets.

The government's approach to the audiovisual sector once again follows a pattern of institutional continuity combined with regulatory adjustments. Instead of dismantling the funding framework established by previous administrations, it

[12] The reform of the audiovisual tax credit system was implemented through a series of regulatory measures, introducing stricter eligibility requirements, mandatory reinvestment obligations, and new transparency standards. The overall audiovisual fund was reduced from €746 million in 2023 to €696 million in 2024. These measures generated significant concern within the audiovisual industry, with prominent directors and producers criticising the reforms for slowing production and discouraging international investment.

[13] Cross-national research on the regulation of streaming platforms has further demonstrated that these policy dynamics are not specific to Italy but form part of a wider European pattern in which national governments balance market liberalisation with cultural protection objectives (Vlassis, 2023).

has sought to slightly modify existing mechanisms while maintaining the central role of tax incentives in audiovisual policy.

6. *Cultural Diplomacy and the International Projection of Italian Culture*

Cultural diplomacy has traditionally been a central component of Italy's international strategy. Italian governments have long emphasised the importance of cultural heritage, artistic production and creative industries as instruments of soft power capable of enhancing the country's international influence (Nye, 2004). Cultural diplomacy is therefore closely linked to the activities of institutions such as the Italian Cultural Institutes abroad, the Venice Biennale, international film festivals and heritage promotion initiatives coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture.

Under the Meloni government, cultural diplomacy has increasingly been framed within an overarching narrative emphasising the historical continuity of Italian civilisation and its contribution to European identity. Political majority discourses frequently highlight the idea that Italian cultural heritage represents a foundational element of Western civilisation, thereby linking national cultural policy to wider geopolitical frameworks concerning European identity and cultural tradition. These themes have deep roots within conservative intellectual traditions in Italy. As Renzi (2025) argues, contemporary right-wing cultural discourse often emphasises the importance of cultural roots and historical continuity as elements of national identity. Within this framework, cultural institutions are interpreted as guardians of civilisational heritage rather than mere administrative structures.

The international dimension is also evident in the governance of major artistic institutions with global visibility. The Venice Biennale, one of the world's most influential contemporary art events, acts as a particularly important instrument of cultural diplomacy. In 2024, the government appointed Pietrangelo Buttafuoco as president of the Biennale, a decision that generated extensive debate within Italian and international cultural circles. Because institutions such as the Venice Biennale constitute prominent sites of cultural governance and international prestige (Bennett, 1995), decisions concerning their governance often attract attention far beyond the cultural sector. Buttafuoco, a journalist and essayist known for his association with conservative intellectual networks, was perceived by critics as a politically symbolic appointment. Supporters of the decision, however, argued that his leadership represented an opportunity to introduce greater ideological diversity within the cultural establishment.

In addition to artistic institutions, cultural diplomacy initiatives have also focused on promoting Italian design, fashion, cuisine and language abroad. These initiatives form part of Italy's overall strategy for projecting cultural influence internationally, reinforcing the perception of Italian culture as a valuable component of national soft power.

7. *Cultural Identity and Symbolic Legislation*

Another dimension of the government's agenda concerns the symbolic use of cultural identity narratives in public policy. Cultural identity has emerged as a central theme within political communication across many European countries, reflecting wider debates about national sovereignty,

globalisation and cultural heritage (Norris & Inglehart, 2019)[14]. One of the most visible examples of symbolic legislation introduced, consistent with the cultural identity dynamics described above, concerns the regulation of cultivated meat production. In 2023, the Italian parliament approved Law No. 172 of 1 December 2023 (Repubblica Italiana, 2023b), which prohibits the production and commercialisation of cultivated meat in Italy. Although the legislation primarily concerns food regulation and agricultural policy, the government's explicit framing of the ban as a defence of Italian culinary heritage shows precisely how cultural identity narratives can migrate beyond traditional cultural domains – rendering seemingly non-cultural legislation an instrument of symbolic politics. Italian cuisine constitutes an important component of national cultural identity and an essential element of the country's cultural diplomacy. By presenting the ban as a defence of traditional food culture, the government linked agricultural regulation to narratives about cultural heritage and national identity. This demonstrates that cultural symbolism can reach beyond its conventional jurisdictional boundaries to shape other areas of public policy. Cultural identity narratives, therefore, become instruments for articulating political legitimacy and mobilising public support.

This logic is also visible in debates about literary and artistic traditions associated with the Italian right. Cultural initiatives dedicated to figures such as J.R.R. Tolkien, whose works have historically been influential within certain conservative intellectual circles in Italy (Renzi, 2025), have attracted public

[14] Scholarly analyses of the Meloni government have highlighted the gendered dimensions of these identity narratives, examining how cultural education and family narratives intersect with public policy in ways that reinforce traditional social norms (De Giorgi, et al., 2023).

attention[15]. These initiatives have been interpreted by some observers as part of a wider effort to construct alternative cultural narratives challenging the perceived dominance of progressive intellectual traditions. Such initiatives are not necessarily direct policy interventions but nonetheless contribute to shaping the symbolic environment in which political debates occur. Cultural discourse, therefore, becomes an important element of ideological competition within democratic politics.

8. *Conclusions: Between the Cultural Strategy of the Right and the Resilience of Pluralism*

The cultural policies pursued under the Meloni government raise fundamental questions about the relationship between symbolic politics and democratic governance. Recent scholarship on populism and democratic politics emphasises the importance of symbolic conflicts in contemporary political competition (Mudde, 2019; Pappas, 2019): cultural issues such as historical interpretation, artistic representation and national heritage increasingly serve as markers of ideological alignment within polarised political environments. As scholars have demonstrated, cultural governance typically encompasses both intrinsic cultural objectives and wider political and economic

[15] In November 2023 the Ministry of Culture organised the exhibition *TOLKIEN. Uomo, Professore, Autore* at the *Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea* in Rome, personally inaugurated by Prime Minister Meloni together with Minister Sangiuliano (Ufficio Stampa e Comunicazione MiC, 2023). The exhibition was the first large-scale Italian exhibition dedicated to Tolkien and was financed by the Ministry with a budget of €250,000. The initiative attracted both praise and criticism, with commentators debating whether it represented a legitimate cultural homage or an instrument of the government's broader cultural strategy (De Antoniis, 2023; Il Post, 2023).

functions, making it a particularly sensitive arena for these conflicts.

In Italy, the perception that cultural institutions have historically been dominated by progressive intellectual traditions has been a recurring theme in conservative political discourse. Within this framing, cultural policy becomes a means of challenging existing intellectual hierarchies and promoting alternative cultural perspectives. Empirical analyses of Italian politics suggest, however, that many policy developments under the current administration reflect institutional continuity rather than systemic transformation (Genovese & Vassallo, 2023; Moury & Pritoni, 2024). The trajectory of Fratelli d'Italia from Euroscepticism to Eurorealism further suggests more a pragmatic adaptation to institutional constraints than a radically disruptive agenda (Massetti, 2023), although structural tensions within Italian democratic governance remain a matter of scholarly debate (Jones, 2023).

The scope of this transformation, however, becomes clearer when read against a longer historical trajectory. As reconstructed by Renzi (2025), the Italian right gradually developed, throughout the second half of the twentieth century, an increasing awareness of the centrality of the cultural dimension in political competition. Beginning in the 1970s, sectors of the post-MSI right and the so-called *Nuova Destra* elaborated a metapolitical strategy paradoxically inspired by the Gramscian theory of cultural hegemony: the idea that control over cultural institutions and the ability to influence intellectual debate constitute decisive conditions for the conquest and consolidation of political power. The consequence was the gradual construction of an alternative cultural ecosystem, composed of publishing houses, journals, foundations, and political training circles, whose aim was to

develop a counter-hegemonic cultural presence capable of challenging the presumed progressive monopoly within the cultural field.

What distinguishes this government is that this longstanding cultural strategy has, for the first time, entered state institutions systematically. Nevertheless, the initial years of the government reveal continuity more than radical institutional restructuring. The key normative pillars – from the Cultural Heritage Code of 2004 to the Cinema and Audiovisual Law of 2016, and the reform of RAI governance adopted in 2015 – continue to structure the architecture of Italian cultural policy. The most significant change lies not at the institutional level but at the symbolic and discursive one: cultural heritage, national history, artistic traditions, and even aspects of food culture have been invoked as components of a broader narrative about the distinctiveness of Italian civilisation, while governance decisions – from appointments in internationally visible artistic organisations to controversies surrounding RAI's editorial practices – have transformed the cultural sector into one of the most visible arenas of political conflict.

The Italian case, however, presents a distinctive trait: the cultural system is highly pluralistic and structurally fragmented. Autonomous universities, independent publishing sectors, local cultural institutions, private foundations, and regional cultural networks together form a highly diversified ecosystem in which the central government plays an important but far from exclusive role. This institutional configuration constitutes one of the principal sources of resilience of Italian cultural democracy. Recent research has documented the emergence of commons-based public-private-community partnerships as a potential counterweight to centralisation, although comprehensive national strategies for their implementation remain absent

(Iaione, et al., 2022). The European institutional framework adds a further layer of regulatory constraints, limiting the possibility of systematic political control over culture. As the literature on new intergovernmentalism suggests, national governments increasingly operate within a web of supranational commitments that shape their room for manoeuvre across policy domains, including culture and media (Hodson & Puetter, 2025).

The Meloni government has not fundamentally transformed the Italian cultural system, but it has contributed to making cultural policy a more explicit site of political contestation. The politicisation of culture does not necessarily signal democratic deterioration: it speaks, instead, to the vitality of political conflict within a pluralistic society. The challenge for Italy's cultural democracy is therefore not to depoliticise culture – an ambition that would likely prove futile – but to ensure that the confrontation between competing visions of national culture continues to take place within institutions that remain open, pluralistic, and respectful of the autonomy of cultural practices. Ultimately, if the historical trajectory of the Italian right has long been characterised by a sense of cultural marginality, the present political phase marks a transition toward a different configuration: no longer a culturally subordinate right but one that fully participates in the struggle for cultural influence. This struggle has not yet produced a new cultural hegemony; it has, however, undeniably transformed the Italian cultural field into a more explicit arena of confrontation between different intellectual traditions and competing interpretations of national identity. Within this unstable balance between symbolic conflict and institutional pluralism lies a defining feature of the contemporary condition of Italian cultural democracy.

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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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