POLIDEMOS



DAMIANO PALANO
(edited by)

HYBRID ITALY

A Democracy amid Global Disorder

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DAMIANO PALANO



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POLIDEMOS

Centro per lo studio della democrazia e dei mutamenti politici

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Introduction. Hybrid Italy: A Democracy amid Global Disorder

DAMIANO PALANO[1]

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

[1] Damiano Palano, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche, damiano.palano@unicatt.it.

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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Democracy as an Instrument for Peace? An Investigation into the Italian Citizens' Opinions

CHIARA ANCILLOTTI[1], ANTONIO CAMPATI[2]
AND ELIA MONTANI[3]

Abstract. This article presents and analyses the findings of the third wave of the Observatory on the State of Democracy survey, conducted by Polidemos in collaboration with Ipsos Doxa on a representative sample of the Italian population, with a focus on citizens' opinions regarding the relationship between democracy, peace and the international order. The survey data reveal a complex and internally differentiated picture that challenges both complacent and catastrophist readings of the current democratic crisis. While a majority of respondents express significant dissatisfaction with the functioning of Italian democracy, widespread distrust of the political class and the media, and the perception that politics has been displaced by economic and financial actors, these orientations do not translate into a rejection of democracy as a system of government. On the contrary, a plurality of citizens identifies the solution to the problems of democracy in a deepening of democratic participation itself – through instruments such as referendums and direct democracy – while favouring a gradualist reformist approach over radical change. The article further examines citizens' perceptions

[1] Chiara Ancillotti, Ipsos Doxa.
[2] Antonio Campati, Department of Political Sciences, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, antonio.campati@unicatt.it
[3] Elia Montani, PhD Candidate, Department of Political Sciences, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, elia.montani@unicatt.it

of the conditions for sustainable peace, showing that respondents prioritise a fair and balanced global economic system, free trade and the strengthening of supranational institutions over military solutions: nine out of ten respondents oppose an increase in Italian defence spending. About the relationship between democracy and peace, the article highlights a significant nuance: while a plurality endorses the Wilsonian assumption that a world of democracies is the most reliable guarantee of peace, a substantial minority maintains that peaceful coexistence between democratic and non-democratic regimes is also possible, with this scepticism towards the democratic peace thesis being especially pronounced among respondents identifying with the centre-right and right. Generational differences are also documented, with Generation Z showing a stronger preference for internationalist and supranational solutions. The article concludes by arguing against both defeatism and naïve optimism: the fundamentals of Italian democratic culture are holding, but the discontent visible in public opinion constitutes a precise and legible signal that governing elites are called to address.

Keywords: Italian public opinion; democracy; peace; democratic crisis; democratic peace theory; survey research.

1. *A world in turmoil*

For more than a century – conventionally, since the perspective outlined by Woodrow Wilson in his speeches concerning the United States' decision to enter the First World War – the increase in the number of democracies has been regarded as the preferred formula for ensuring the pacification of the international order. Although in alternating phases of advance and setback, a gradual expansion of democracy has taken place. In particular, from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, the number of democratic regimes, especially in the Western world, has increased significantly. However, in the past decade – as is now widely recognised – this trend has come

to a halt. On the contrary, we are witnessing evidence of democratic backsliding in several contexts. This regression is mainly analysed along two distinct yet interconnected trajectories. The first is linked to the crisis of the liberal international order, which appears in various ways, some of which would have been difficult to imagine only a few years ago, such as, for example, the marginalisation of certain international organisations. The second concerns internal factors within democratic systems, such as the rise of populist movements and parties, as well as a broader crisis in forms of political participation. In addition to this already troubling picture, there is a worrying statistic: according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, in 2024 there were 61 different state-based conflicts worldwide. We are therefore clearly entering a phase of profound transformation. The dominant interpretative frameworks that once seemed to guide epistemic communities in interpreting reality appear increasingly inadequate. In this context, developing new analytical tools becomes essential to avoid the risk of producing interpretations that are no longer aligned with the contemporary scenario.

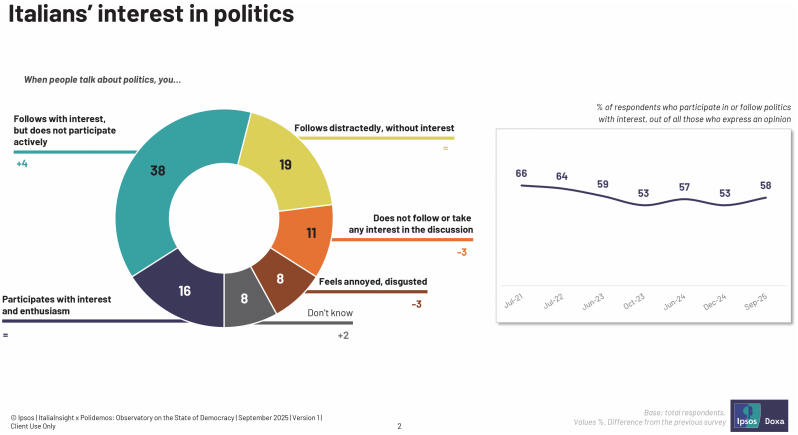
This article presents and analyses the findings of the third survey conducted by the Observatory on the State of Democracy carried out by Polidemos in collaboration with Ipsos Doxa[4] on a representative sample[5] of the Italian population. Its aim is to shed light on Italian citizens' opinion on a number of key

[4] The survey is part of the wider research project Dem.In.W.Peace: Democracy. An Investment in Welfare and Peace (Research Line D.3.2. 2023 of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore).

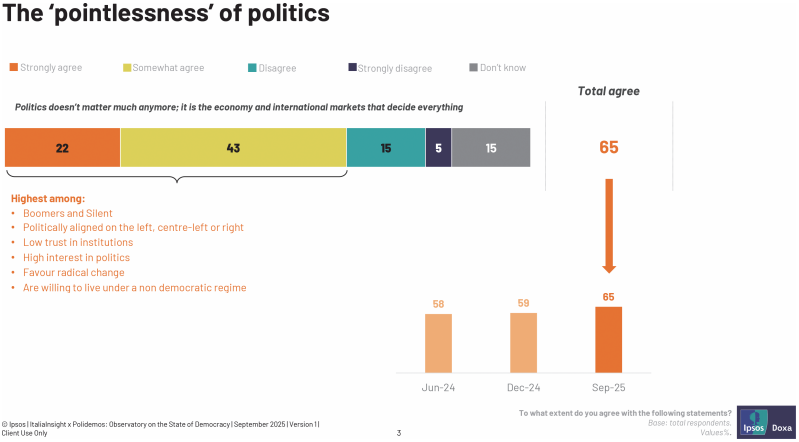
[5] Survey conducted by Ipsos Doxa for Polidemos among a random stratified sample representative of the Italian adult population, weighted by gender, age, educational attainment, geographical area of residence and size of municipality of residence. A total of 800 interviews (out of 3,757 contacts) were conducted online using the CAWI method between 22 and 25 September 2025.

issues, beginning with the role that democracy can still play in fostering a peaceful global order. In particular, the first part of the chapter will outline trends in public opinion regarding Italian politics, with particular attention to its assessment of the functioning of democracy. Notably, the democratic crisis outlined above appears to have prompted respondents to call for more democracy, and thus for democratic tools that enhance public engagement. The second part of the contribution will examine in greater depth the judgements concerning which instruments are considered most suitable for pursuing peace, focusing especially on the relationship between the democratisation of peoples, the international order and the global economic landscape. In conclusion, two main directions will be suggested as the outcome of the analysis of Italian citizens' opinions: on the one hand, the need not to characterise the increasingly discussed crisis of democracy in an undifferentiated manner or in apocalyptic terms; on the other, the need not to assume that the current scenario is positive, but rather to develop a set of corrective measures aimed at addressing specific dynamics, policies, and decisions that Italian citizens – far from indifferently – are able to identify as harmful to the future of democracy, both at the national level and beyond.

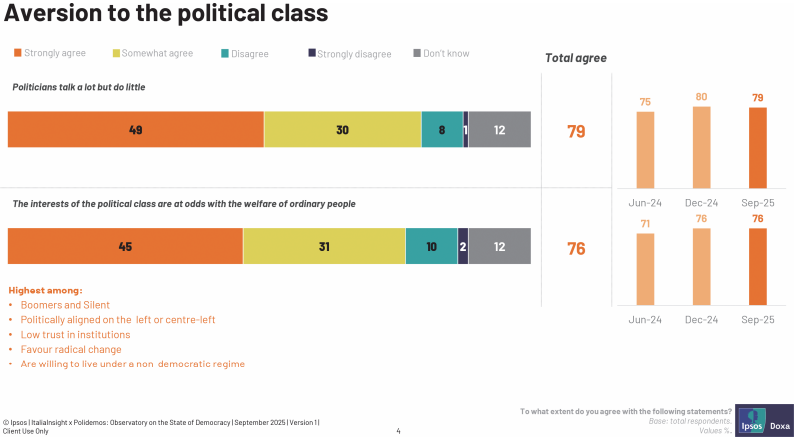
2. *The solution to the crisis of democracy? More democracy*

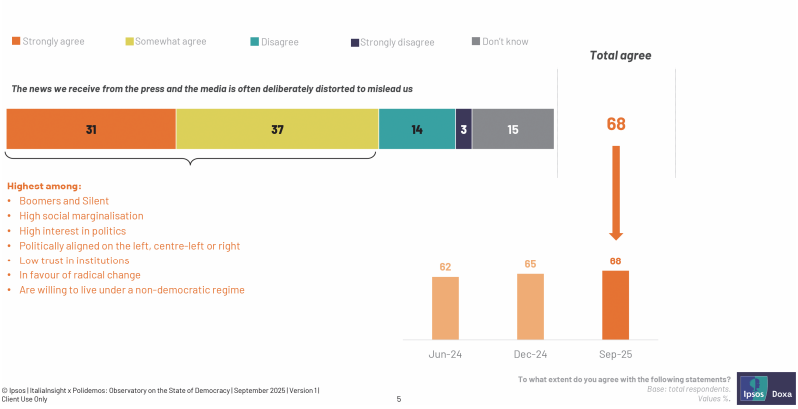


Although the prevailing narrative often tends to portray the Italian population as indifferent and disengaged from public affairs, the data provide a more complex and differentiated picture. While 19% of respondents declare themselves uninterested in and even irritated by politics, a clear majority (73%) follow political developments. Among these, however, only 54% express a genuine interest. Notably, the percentage of respondents who both follow and are interested in politics is five points higher than the two lowest levels recorded in October 2023 and December 2024. Yet, even within this group, active engagement remains limited: only 16% (of the previous 54%) declare participating in politics with interest.



The partially positive levels of public interest in politics are not accompanied by a corresponding attribution of value to its role. Indeed, 65% of respondents agree with the statement that politics no longer has a significant impact on the global scenario, having been replaced by the economy and the financial markets. What is particularly striking about this finding – beyond the cross-cutting political preferences from which it emerges – is that this perception of politics is held precisely by those who show a high level of interest in it. In other words, a paradox emerges: the citizens most interested in political affairs are also those who tend to attribute limited effectiveness to the current forms of politics, democracy in particular.

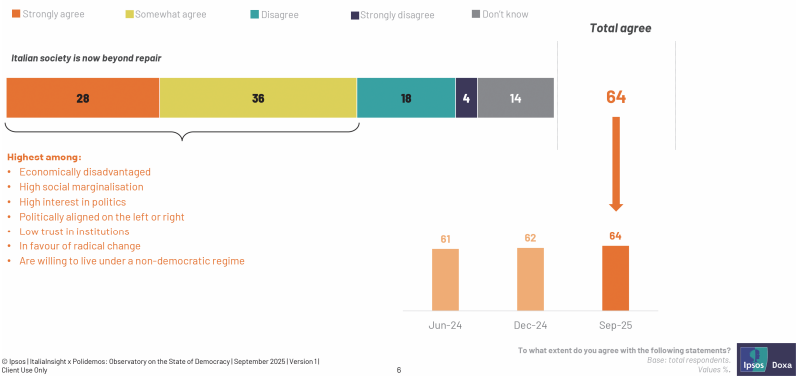




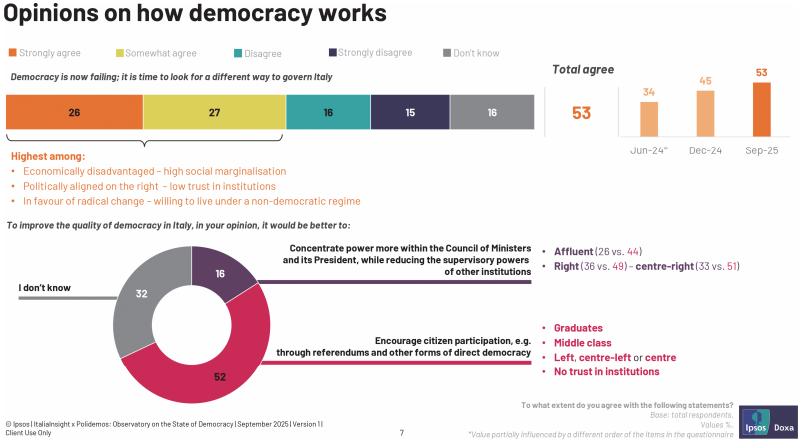
A similarly critical picture emerges in public evaluations about key actors of the political sphere, broadly understood to include the political class, the press and the media. With regard to the political class, 79% of respondents believe that politicians rarely succeed in addressing or influencing the country's most pressing problems, while as many as 76%

argue that political elites pursue interests that conflict with the common interests. Even the media and the press are evaluated critically. Indeed, 68% of respondents believe that the information they convey is not only often distorted, but deliberately so. Taken together, these findings suggest that in Italy the central issue lies less in levels of political interest *per se* and more in the ways in which politics and democracy are practised. In particular, concerns focus on the quality of political representation, closely followed by the functioning of the media sector.

The decline of Italian society

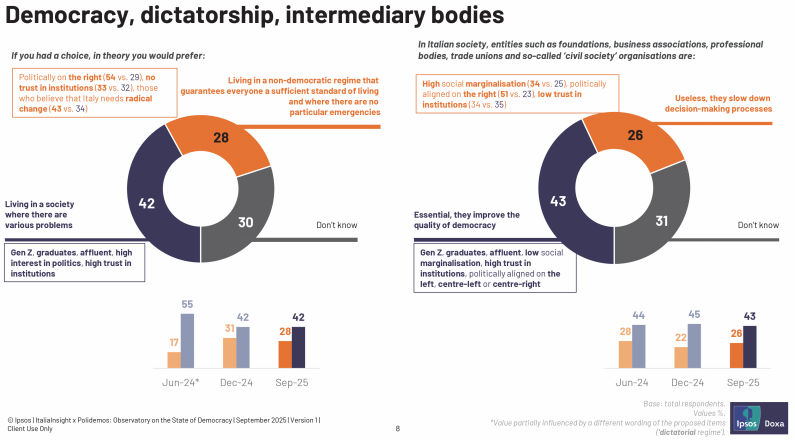


The pessimism evident in Italian citizens' views on politics is also reflected, albeit to a lesser extent, in their perceptions of Italian society: 64% of respondents believe that Italian society is now in decline, describing it as a "broken" society.



Having clarified the broader context within which this survey is situated, the following data focus more specifically on Italian democracy. The first noteworthy aspect concerns opinions regarding its functioning. A majority of respondents (53%) believe that democracy is now compromised and that, as a consequence, it is necessary to find alternative ways of governing the country. However, this result should not be oversimplified. While the level of concern is significant, widespread dissatisfaction and distrust towards politics and the political class (65% and 79% of respondents, respectively) do not translate into outright hostility towards democracy itself. This suggests that a significant proportion of disillusioned or disengaged citizens are not willing to sacrifice the democratic system. If, therefore, democracy is not called into question by nearly half of respondents, this implies that the improvements needed in the Italian political system must be implemented within the democratic framework. Indeed, according to 52% of respondents, the solution to improve the quality of democracy is not to abandon it, but rather to implement it

using more democratic tools such as referendums and other forms of direct democracy. We can therefore conclude that, for at least one in two respondents, the solution to the problems of democracy lies in an increase in democracy itself.

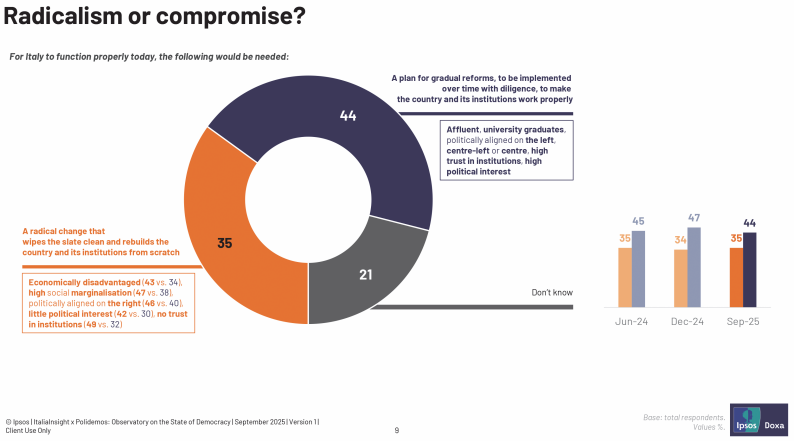


When the issue of maintaining the democratic system is pushed to its limits, respondents display less certainty than in the opinions previously examined regarding its functioning. Faced with a choice between a society characterised by various problems and a non-democratic regime capable of guaranteeing everyone an adequate level of well-being and the absence of major crises, a significant proportion (30%) of respondents are unable to answer, while an equally substantial share (28%) declare themselves willing to give up democracy. This finding points to a decline in the proportion of citizens who support democracy "unconditionally" (42%), that is those who would choose it not only for the results it produces, but also for its intrinsic value. This is an element that should not be overlooked and that requires careful reflection, especially

in light of the international context. Further insight into how citizens understand democracy emerges from the second set of data. When asked about the role that civil society organisations such as foundations, business associations, professional bodies and trade unions can play within the democratic system, 31% of respondents are unable to provide an answer, while 26% view them primarily as obstacles to effective decision-making. However, the 43% of respondents who view them as actors capable of creating better conditions for democracy should not be underestimated. What is particularly noteworthy, however, is the correlation between these positions. It is difficult not to notice that both the proportions and the socio-demographic segments that identify most strongly with these opinions display a clear convergence.

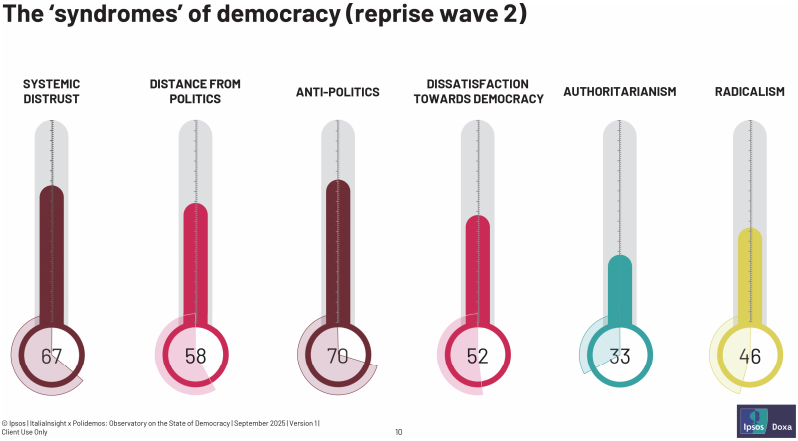
Those who consider a non-democratic regime preferable tend to assign little or no value to civil society organisations. Conversely, respondents who favour democratic systems, even when these are perceived as flawed, tend to regard such organisations as essential to the quality of democracy.

Taken together, the findings of the two sets of data therefore suggest that those who are inclined to sacrifice democracy generally do not consider civil society organisations to be useful, even though – according to the Constitution itself – they should play a central role in the structuring of Italian democracy. In light of this, it can therefore be argued that respondents who attribute intrinsic value to democracy recognise the decisive role that civil society organisations can play.



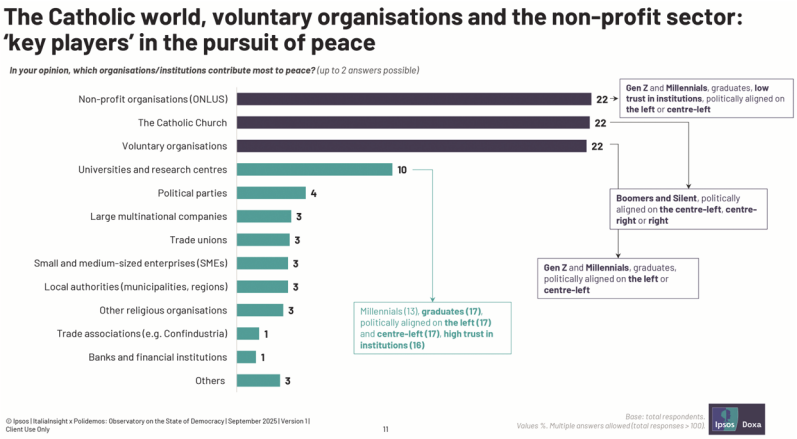
Further confirming the interpretations provided, namely, that scepticism towards political parties and politics does not automatically translate into a willingness to abandon democracy, the survey indicates that a plurality of respondents favour a gradualist approach. Specifically, 44% support the implementation of incremental reforms over time as a means of improving the country's situation. By contrast, just over one-third of respondents (35%) advocate more radical changes to the defining features of contemporary Italian society. While this may appear as a reassuring finding, it should be treated with caution. Indeed, it should be noted that, if one combines the percentages of citizens who would choose radical change with those who were unable to provide an answer (21%), the resulting total exceeds the proportion of citizens who would adopt a more "reformist" approach.

The 'syndromes' of democracy (reprise wave 2)



This summary figure, intended to measure the "temperature" of several indicators useful for understanding the state of health of Italian democracy, offers a more nuanced picture than might initially be expected. While levels of pessimism and aversion towards politics and the system clearly exceed half of respondents, they decrease significantly when dissatisfaction concerns not the political system as a whole but democracy itself. A similar pattern emerges with regard to authoritarian alternatives: fewer than half of those who express systemic distrust and aversion to politics would be willing to embrace an authoritarian option. Although this may be seen as a reassuring sign for the resilience of democratic systems, the finding requires careful qualification. When the authoritarian option is replaced by the prospect of radical reform, support rises markedly, reaching levels nearly comparable to dissatisfaction with democracy. All of this points to a rather widespread demand to embark on a path of change within the Italian political system.

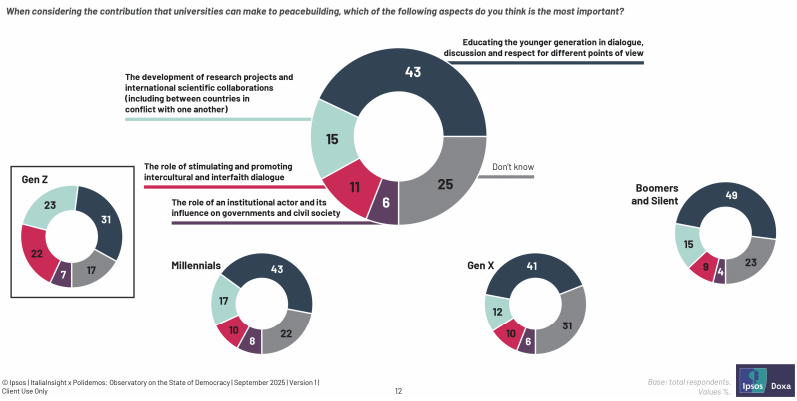
3. *Who builds peace? What tools ensure it?*



When asked which organisations and institutions contribute most to peacebuilding, citizens' responses provide several interesting insights, particularly regarding the role they attribute to different actors. First of all, it is not surprising that the three entities considered most involved in promoting peace are – each with 22% – non-profit organisations (ONLUS), the Catholic Church and voluntary organisations. Universities and research centres rank fourth, traditionally regarded as spaces for education and training grounded in a culture of peace and dialogue. However, only 10% of respondents believe that universities can play an effective role in promoting peace. This suggests that Italians tend to favour solutions characterised by "direct" interventions in conflict areas, such as humanitarian aid, while showing less confidence in the contribution that academic culture can provide. Two further trends are particularly noteworthy. The first concerns the perceptions citizens have of political actors in the broadest sense: political

parties (4%), trade unions (3%) and local authorities (3%) are widely considered as having limited influence in fostering peace. A similar pattern emerges in the economic sphere. Large companies and multinationals (3%), as well as banks and financial institutions (1%) are not regarded as key contributors to peacebuilding, pointing to a perceived disconnect – at least in public opinion – between economic actors and the prospects for peace.

How do universities contribute to peacebuilding?

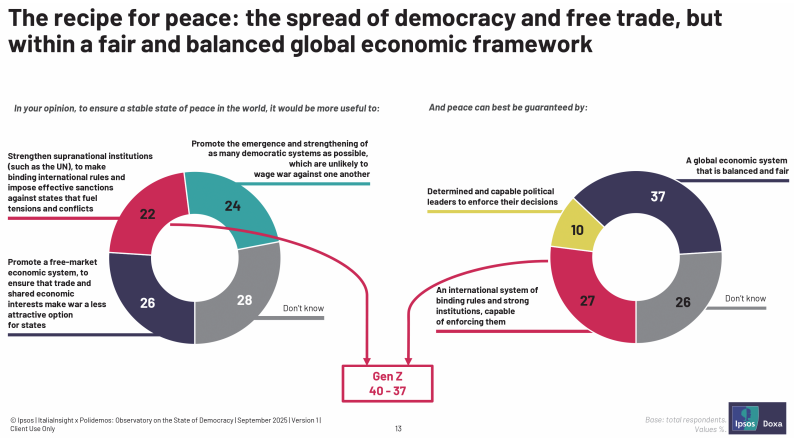


It is particularly appropriate to reflect on the contribution of universities to peacebuilding. When asked to identify the most significant aspects of the university system in this regard, almost half of respondents (43%) pointed to the education of younger generations in dialogue, debate and respect for differing viewpoints, thus emphasising the cultural dimension of higher education institutions.

At the same time, a notable proportion of respondents (25%) were unable to provide an answer, suggesting a degree

of uncertainty or limited awareness of the broader role universities might play.

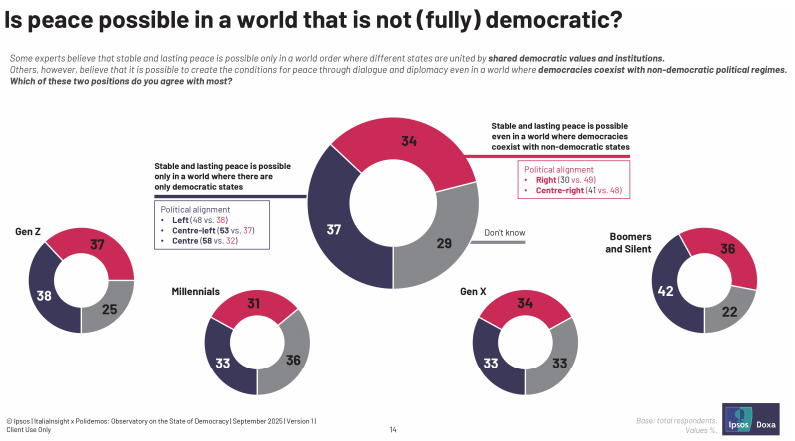
A final point worth highlighting concerns a novelty introduced by Generation Z: while older cohorts display relatively consistent patterns in their responses, Gen Z, whilst still prioritising the educational aspect, values it to a significantly lesser extent (31%), in favour of placing greater emphasis on the role of promoting intercultural and interreligious dialogue. In fact, for Gen Z, this percentage doubles (22%).



When broadening the analysis to identify the conditions considered as necessary to promote peace, some unexpected patterns emerge. Notably, the promotion of a free-trade economic system ranks first (26%), despite the growing criticism it has attracted in recent years for its impact on contemporary societies. This "economic solution" is followed, just two percentage points behind, by support for strengthening democratic systems and promoting the

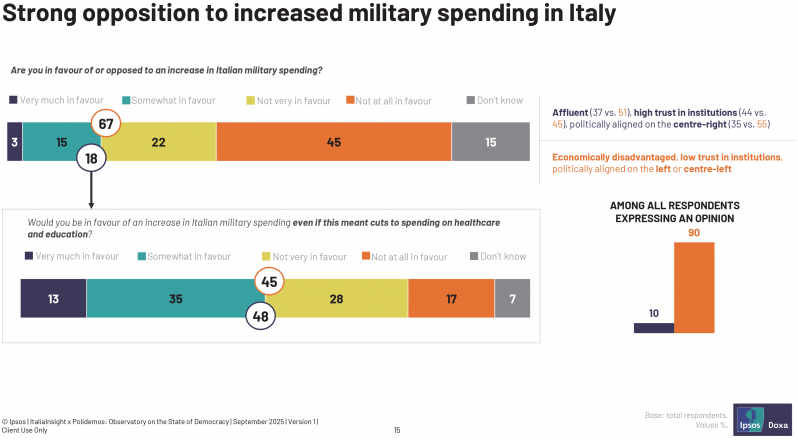
democratisation of non-democratic countries. Closely aligned with these (22%), we can note the view for which the key to peace lies in strengthening supranational institutions such as the United Nations. A comparable distribution emerges when respondents are asked which actors are best placed to guarantee peace. In this case, a similar proportion of respondents believes that this guarantee should come from institutions and rules that transcend national borders (27%). Once again, the data suggest that the strongest safeguard against conflict may lie in the economic system, particularly in a global system that is balanced and fair (37%).

Finally, confirming a trend already observed, there is a widespread lack of confidence in the ability of political leaders to act as guarantors of a peaceful global order (10%). On this issue as well, generational differences stand out. In particular, Generation Z shows a stronger preference for internationalist solutions, placing greater trust in supranational institutions (40%) and systems of international rules (37%) as effective instruments for ensuring peace.



When investigating the relationship between democracy and peace, the majority of respondents (37%) believes that peace is both possible and sustainable only within a global order made up of democratic states. However, this view is closely matched by those who argue that democracy does not automatically guarantee peace, and that peaceful coexistence is also possible in a world where democratic and non-democratic regimes coexist. This position is supported by a significant 34% of respondents, calling into question a long-standing assumption of twentieth-century political thought – most notably associated with Woodrow Wilson – that more democracy necessarily leads to more peace. In this regard, it is interesting to observe how respondents are positioned along the political spectrum. While respondents identifying with the left, centre, and centre-left tend to uphold a strong link between democracy and peace, those on the right and centre-right express greater scepticism. Among the latter, a majority does not view the absence of democracy in certain states as a decisive obstacle to the maintenance of global peace.

Strong opposition to increased military spending in Italy



Finally, the third survey conducted by the Polidemos – Ipsos Doxa Observatory on the State of Democracy focuses on public opinion about the relationship between democracy and the use of military force. Overall, the Italian people can be broadly described as pacifist and sceptical towards military spending, since nine citizens out of ten are in no way favourable to an increase in military spending in Italy. More specifically, 67% of respondents are not in favour of increased military expenditure, compared to 18% who instead consider such an increase necessary.

Despite the overwhelming majority of those who do not believe that increased military spending is conducive to peace, it should be noted that those who support the opposite view do so with conviction. Indeed, of the 18% of respondents who declare themselves in favour of increasing military expenditure, 48% would maintain their stance even if it required cuts to key areas such as healthcare and education, compared to 45% who would not.

4. *Neither defeatism nor naïve optimism*

Although it is becoming increasingly common – and communicatively effective – to invoke a pervasive systemic crisis, the data from the third survey conducted by the Polidemos – Ipsos Doxa Observatory on the State of Democracy suggest a far less apocalyptic scenario. While the overall picture is certainly not a reassuring one, it shows that Italian citizens – despite identifying numerous shortcomings in both the political and economic systems – are not willing to abandon democracy. Moreover, respondents do not appear to adopt a defeatist view of the interdependencies linking democracy to the global economic order. In essence, it can be said that the fundamentals

are holding, even though serious critical issues remain. This leads us to argue that political and governing elites should finally recognise that the discontent observable in public opinion is not an indistinct feeling of mistrust, but a signal that certain dynamics, certain policies and certain decisions are not shared because they are regarded as harmful to the future of the country.

Lastly, it will be in the management of the ongoing international crises, and above all in responding to the re-emergence of dynamics typical of war, that the ability of those holding political and institutional responsibility to continue guaranteeing peace – both a prior and a necessary condition – will be measured.

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Prudence, Pragmatism and the Aspiration for Peace: Interpreting Italian Public Opinion's Mood in a Turbulent World through the lens of Classical Political Realism

ENRICO BIANCHI[1]

Abstract. This article reconstructs the prevailing mood of Italian public opinion on international politics in 2025, drawing on survey data produced by multiple research institutes (including Censis, Eurispes, ISPI-Ipsos Doxa, the European Parliament Eurobarometer, and Polidemos – Ipsos Doxa) which are treated not as a unified dataset but as complementary empirical indicators of recurrent collective orientations. The analysis shows that Italians display widespread anxiety about the international environment, particularly regarding ongoing conflicts and their potential consequences, combined with a notable recalibration of perceived alliances: Russia remains the primary identified threat, but confidence in the United States as a reliable partner has declined significantly under the second Trump presidency. Despite this anxiety, Italian public opinion tends toward neutralist and non-aligned stances on both the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, prioritising the cessation of hostilities over firm alignment with any belligerent party. Support for collective security frameworks (NATO and European integration) is broadly diffused but appears more pragmatic than ideological, and does not translate into a corresponding willingness to bear the economic or personal costs of

[1] Enrico Bianchi, PhD Candidate, Department of Political Sciences, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, enrico.bianchi@unicatt.it

military engagement. A persistent and deeply rooted opposition to increased defence spending coexists with aspirations for a rules-based international order and the spread of democracy as guarantors of peace. The article proposes to interpret this overall pattern through the categories of political realism, particularly the tension between realism and utopia elaborated by Edward Hallett Carr in the interwar period. The Italian mood emerges as a form of 'utopian realism': pragmatic and prudential in its assessment of power relations, sceptical of universalistic narratives, and inclined toward burden-sharing and free-riding within collective frameworks, yet simultaneously animated by a stable aspiration for peace that oscillates, at times inconsistently, between active moral commitment and the tendency to withdraw from practical responsibility.

Keywords: Italian public opinion; international politics; pacifism; political realism; Carr.

This analysis draws on survey data produced by different research institutes, over partially overlapping timeframes, concerning the opinions expressed by Italians in 2025 on the turbulent international situation the world is experiencing. These datasets will not be treated as directly comparable in a strict quantitative sense, given differences in sampling strategies, modes of data collection, and question wording. Rather than aiming at statistical aggregation or trend measurement, this essay proposes a reconstructive use of survey evidence. The surveys are thus used not as a unified dataset, but as complementary empirical indicators and as a heuristic device that illuminate recurrent orientations and interpretive frames through which Italian citizens perceive the contemporary international environment. In this sense, they

are used as empirical lenses through which to reconstruct a broadly shared collective orientation, a prevailing mood toward the current scenario. As argued in the conclusions, the overall pattern appears to point to a widespread, and not new, tendency toward 'pacifism' in the face of renewed international conflict, which affects Italy in a relatively indirect yet still significant way. At the same time, this attitude seems tempered and, to a certain extent, complicated by considerations of prudence, disillusionment and self-preservation. This essay therefore proposes to interpret the Italian mood of opinion through some categories of political realism, particularly the tension between realism and utopia emphasized by the classic realist thinker Edward Hallett Carr in the interwar period, when anxiety about war strongly shaped European public opinion.

1. *Italian public opinion on international politics in 2025: between collective anxiety, disillusionment and non-alignment*

Against the backdrop of a volatile international landscape defined by systemic conflicts, trade tensions, and deepening polarization, the Italian public exhibits widespread sentiments of apprehension and disorientation. These trends are corroborated by all major institutional surveys. While concern remains particularly pronounced with regard to domestic issues, especially those related to the economy and climate (Eurispes, 2025), anxiety over the international scenario is also notably high. A survey commissioned by the European Parliament in Autumn 2025 reveals levels of concern that, in some respects, exceed the European average: 83% of Italians report being «highly concerned» about «active conflicts and wars near the European Union» (EU-27 average: 72%), while 76% express concern over

«drones from non-EU countries operating over or near EU countries» (EU average: 60%) (European Parliament, 2025, p. 8), despite the lack of evidence that Italy has been directly affected by this phenomenon.

Nevertheless, although concern about the evolving international environment is widespread, the fear that escalating conflicts may directly involve Italy, while not negligible, appears relatively contained. The prospect of a global conflagration still triggers substantial anxiety: according to the 2025 Eurispes Report, 46% of Italians fear a third world war (Eurispes, 2025). At the same time, a survey published in July 2025 by Censis on the perception of conflicts and rearmament in Italian society shows that respondents estimate, on average, a 31% probability that Italy will be directly involved in a conflict over the next five years, with slight variations depending on age and level of education (Censis, 2025a, p. 9). As a general diagnosis, the 59th Censis General Report on Italian society indicates that 38.8% of Italians believe the world has entered a phase in which relations between major powers are primarily adjudicated through military force (Censis, 2025b, p. 4).

The considered investigations also highlight a significant recalibration of perceived international equilibria, influenced notably by the second Trump presidency. 50% of respondents to the Censis investigation on the perception of conflicts identify Russia as the primary threat, while 23% point to the United States, whose reliability as an ally in the event of a war is, moreover, questioned by 46% (Censis, 2025a, pp. 11-13). Consistent results appear in the ISPI and Ipsos Doxa 2025 survey on Italians and international politics: while Russia is cited as the main threat by 32%, the U.S. is cited by 12%, and notably the net balance between those viewing the U.S. as an ally versus a competitor has plummeted from +47% in the 2020-2022 period

to +19% in 2025 (ISPI and Ipsos Doxa, 2025); the same survey shows that for 54% of respondents, after one year under the Trump administration, the global situation has deteriorated.

Concurrently, the cessation of ongoing hostilities represents the primary source of hope. According to the ISPI and Ipsos Doxa survey (2025), 64% identify peace in an active conflict as the most positive potential event (34% regarding the Russia-Ukraine war, 24% regarding the Middle East, and 6% regarding Sudan), whereas smaller cohorts prioritize improved relations between superpowers (25%), increased European defence spending (8%) and the foreign policy (7%); conversely, 32% of respondents stated that a «stronger economic growth in Europe»[2] would be the most hopeful event. Despite these anxieties, Italian public opinion tends toward relatively moderate stances on current conflicts, prioritizing the termination of hostilities over definitive alignment with any belligerent party. Regarding the Russia-Ukraine war, Censis finds that 33% believe Italy should support Kyiv, 5% Moscow, while 62% favour maintaining neutrality (Censis, 2025a, p. 13). The ISPI and Ipsos Doxa survey (2025) additionally shows that 49% believe hostilities should end even at the cost of Ukrainian territorial concessions. A similar orientation emerges regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: according to Censis, 21% favour siding with the Palestinians, 9% with Israel, while 70% prefer a neutral stance (Censis, 2025a, p. 13).

In this climate of tension, Italians appear sceptical of the nation's capacity to address security challenges autonomously. Censis reports that 65% believe Italy would be «overwhelmed» if it were to fight alone (Censis, 2025a, p. 11). Consequently, a

[2] All literal quotations from texts originally written in Italian are presented in the author's translation.

quite strong confidence in collective security frameworks, particularly NATO and European Union, emerges. According to Censis, 49% of Italians believe NATO should be strengthened, 58% view the establishment of an EU defence system as the optimal solution for national security, meanwhile 22% express a generally hostile stance toward defence policies, stating that they support neither the creation of a 'European army' nor the strengthening of national armed forces, and 8% state that Italy should withdraw from all alliances and rely solely on its own national forces (Censis, 2025a, p. 12). Eurobarometer survey confirms this trend: 67% of Italians argue that the EU's role in security must expand, and 91% believe member states must show greater unity in addressing global challenges (European Parliament, 2025, pp. 12-13).

Beyond aspirations for future developments, the Italian assessment of the current international landscape points toward a perceived political weakness of the EU. The 2025 Censis report indicates that 52.8% of respondents believe that «in a world now dominated by force and aggression rather than international law, the EU will play a marginal role» (Censis, 2025b, p. 3). Naturally, the EP survey provides a detailed analysis of these aspects. According to this data (European Parliament, 2025, p. 11), 67% of Italians believe that «the role of the European Union to protect European citizens against global crises and security risks» should become «more important» (EU-27 average: 66%); furthermore, the same survey (p. 12) shows that 91% of Italian respondents agreed that «EU Member States should be more united in addressing global challenges» (EU-27 average: 89%), and 80% agree that the EU requires more means to confront current challenges (EU-27 average: 73%).

Economic implications and the broader costs associated with increased commitment to defence and security within an

increasingly conflict-ridden global landscape appear to dominate Italian concerns when assessing a more direct and concrete involvement of both society as a whole and individuals. Although a majority of citizens seems to support Italy's participation in the European security framework and advocate for its strengthening, this does not translate into a greater willingness to directly bear the social or personal costs required to advance in this direction. In the July 2025 Censis survey, 26% of respondents stated that rearmament is necessary to ensure peace through deterrence, and 25% expressed a willingness to support cuts in social spending to fund military reinforcement plans (Censis, 2025a, p. 11); however, the general report on 2025 Italian society provided by the same institution reveals a significant collective countertrend: as many as 66% of respondents declared that if rearmament necessitates reductions in welfare spending, it is preferable not to pursue it (Censis, 2025b, p. 12). A clear opposition to increased military spending also emerges from the results of a survey conducted by Polidemos and Ipsos Doxa in autumn 2025: 67% of respondents expressed this view, and, among the 18% who instead declared themselves in favour, 45% stated that they would change their position if such an increase entailed reductions in welfare spending, while, perhaps more unexpectedly, 48% would maintain their approval even in that case (Ancillotti, Campati and Montani, 2026, p. 23). It is interesting to observe, in this regard, that the same study shows that the propensity to increase military spending is slightly higher among Gen Z respondents, who also appear to be the most inclined to identify in an international system based on effective rules, strong institutions, and the strengthening of democracy the most favourable conditions for the promotion of peace (Ancillotti, Campati and Montani, 2026, p. 23): it can therefore be hypothesised that this

preference for an international order governed by law translates, among young Italians, albeit to a very limited extent, into a lower opposition to the development of enforcement instruments that may also include national rearmament (Scavo, 2026, p. 36).

In any case, this caution regarding financial commitment to security and defence is coupled with a low willingness to become personally involved in case of conflict. Censis finds that, among citizens aged 18 to 45, only 16% declare a readiness to fight, 39% identify as pacifists, and 26% believe defence should be the sole responsibility of professional soldiers; finally, 19% state they would desert if called to arms (Censis, 2025a, p. 10). Reflecting this sentiment, 42.7% of respondents to the same institution's 2025 general report believe that Italy should not intervene militarily to defend another NATO or EU country if it were attacked (Censis, 2025b, p. 12).

Another particularly significant element concerns the way Italians are responding to the current turbulent scenario from a values perspective, at a time marked by intense debates over the emerging multipolar world order and the crisis of democracies. The general Censis report shows that 38.7% of Italians believe that «democracies are no longer adequate in a world where strength and aggressiveness count more than law and diplomacy», while 29.7% consider autocratic regimes to be better equipped to navigate such a context. The same survey indicates that 55.2% of respondents believe that the future belongs to emerging powers such as China and India rather than to the West (Censis, 2025b, p. 4). A significant degree of anti-Western sentiment in Italian society had already been identified by Censis with its 58th report on Italian society in 2024, which devoted particular attention to what they described as a «drift away from unifying values» (Censis, 2024,

p. 8). According to that report, 70.8% of respondents believed that Western countries seek to impose their political and economic model on others, 68.5% expressed a general lack of trust in the functioning of Western democracies, and 66.3% considered «Western countries (led by the United States)» to be primarily responsible for the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East (Censis, 2024, pp. 7–8).

The picture, in this regard, is further completed and enriched by the report by Polidemos and Ipsos Doxa specifically dedicated to «Democracy and Peace». At a general level, the survey reveals a high degree of distrust in the current Italian political system, which, however, does not seem to translate, at least to a significant extent, into greater openness to authoritarian solutions and a deep distrust towards democracy itself. Indeed, while 53% of respondents believe that Italian democracy functions poorly, only 28% state that they would be willing to live under an authoritarian regime if it proved more efficient, whereas 42%, when faced with this trade-off, would still prefer to live in a democratic society despite its inefficiencies and shortcomings (Ancillotti, Campati and Montani, 2026, p. 16). Consistently with this pattern, 44% of respondents favour a gradual process of reform and improvement of the country, compared to 35% who instead support more radical solutions (p. 17). Alongside a marked aversion to the political class, the survey also highlights a significant level of distrust in the information system: 68% of respondents agree with the statement that «the news we receive from the press and the media is often intentionally distorted to mislead us» (Ancillotti, Campati and Montani, 2026, p. 13). This distrust toward actors perceived as institutional or linked to political and economic elites also emerges in the identification of those actors considered most relevant for the construction of peace paths: the highest levels of trust are

attributed, jointly (22%), to NGOs, the Catholic Church, and voluntary organisations, whereas significantly lower levels are assigned to political parties (4%), trade unions (3%), and large companies or multinational corporations (1%) (p. 19). With regard to the strategies considered most effective for promoting peace, the survey results outline two main, partially complementary approaches. On the one hand, an economic and, to a certain extent, liberal perspective emerges, which identifies the strengthening of free trade and economic interdependence as a key stabilising mechanism: 26% of respondents believe that promoting a system of free trade, capable of making war economically disadvantageous, represents the most effective solution for ensuring lasting peace; on the other hand, a more distinctly internationalist perspective takes shape, grounded in the strengthening of cooperation among states, supranational institutions, and international law: 22% point to the reinforcement of the UN and international institutions as the main pathway to stable peace; to these is added a component linked to democratic peace theory, cited by 24% of respondents, according to which the spread of democracy contributes to reducing the likelihood of armed conflict (Ancillotti, Campati and Montani, 2026, p. 21). Within this framework, a certain degree of distrust toward perceived hegemonic arrangements also emerges, in which one can discern, albeit in a less explicitly articulated form, the same critical attitude toward the West that had surfaced in other investigations: 37% of respondents believe that a more just and balanced global economic system constitutes a fundamental grant for peace, while 27% emphasise again the importance of the effective enforcement of rules governing relations among states (Ancillotti, Campati and Montani, 2026, p. 21). At the same time, a nuanced view of the relationship between democracy and international

stability persists: while 37% consider a world composed exclusively of democratic states as the most reliable guarantee of lasting peace, 34% believe that the coexistence of democratic and non-democratic systems can also ensure a stable international order (Ancillotti, Campati and Montani, 2026, p. 22).

2. *Public opinion and international politics in Italy and beyond: a debated and disputed terrain*

In the study of the relationship between public opinion and international politics, several phases can be identified, reflecting shifting scholarly convictions regarding the public's ability to form opinions on international events, traditionally perceived as far more distant from daily reality compared to domestic policy issues.

From the end of World War II to the 1960s, the prevailing view among researchers, primarily in the United States, was summarized in 1992 by Ole Holsti as the «Almond-Lippmann consensus» (Holsti, 1992). This line of thought generally held that the public was poorly informed about international events, leading to perceptions that were unstable, volatile, and lacking in coherence, and thus largely insignificant in governmental foreign policy decisions. With the advent of the Vietnam War and the refinement of polling techniques, the American debate again led to a shift in approach, according to which public opinion is actually capable of forming coherent and justified views on international affairs and is not subject to sudden mood swings without identifiable causes (e.g. Holsti, 1996). Based on these assumptions, researchers began to explore how foreign policy preferences are formed through ideological positioning or social context. Post-Cold War

developments further encouraged studies investigating public consensus regarding, for instance, military interventions abroad. The role of political and media elites, whose relevance had already been highlighted by Shapiro and Page (1988), is highly significant: as citizens often struggle to access rational information independently, these elites interpret and re-transmit external reality, decisively contributing to forge the society's climate of opinion on international matters. The construction of support for military commitment or, more generally, for alternative world orders then often relies on building an effective «strategic narrative» with a contextually grounded and shared storytelling of events (Freedman, 2006; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2013). Crucially, this process can be challenged by counter-narratives, which international actors may strategically exploit, particularly within the pervasive and evolving digital environment; consequently, literature on the effects of disinformation and fake news is steadily growing (e.g. Bennett and Livingston, 2020; Arcos, Chiru and Ivan, 2024; Giusti, 2023).

Coming to Italy, studies since the early Nineties have tempered the notion that the country was an exception in terms of low interest in international politics (Bellucci and Isernia, 1999, pp. 446-448). However, this tendency is actually relevant: despite the current global alarm, research by Angelucci and Isernia (2025, p. 241) indicates that, since 1994, the proportion of Italians believing the country should prioritize domestic over international problems has consistently remained above 40%, standing at 50% in 2024.

It is worth noting that, historically, foreign and strategic politics were somewhat marginalized in post-WWII Italian public debate due to overall scepticism about national capabilities and the influence of the two main political cultures, specifically Christian Democratic and Communist,

that preferred to downplay the military dimension (Battistelli, 2004, pp. 69-78). A resurgence of interest occurred with Italy's participation in multilateral missions starting in the early 1990s, which also saw a renewed appreciation for the armed forces (Battistelli, 2004, pp. 121-130) confirmed by recent data (e.g. Eurispes, 2025): this suggests that the general pacifist attitude in the country does not necessarily equate to deep-seated anti-militarism. Additionally, it should be noted that, while there is general and consolidated support for participation in Atlantic and European security frameworks (Battistelli, 2004, pp. 150-157), a non-negligible minority – just over 20% in 2024, according to Angelucci and Isernia (2025, p. 242) – expresses neutralist positions, advocating for withdrawal from all military alliances. Furthermore, the literature seems to confirm that the tendency to oppose increased defence spending is a long-standing one (Battistelli, 2004, p. 131; Coticchia, 2014, p. 59; Isernia, Borri and Martini, 2022).

Considering ideological influence, in the current political scenario Italians on the left show higher levels of Europeanism and internationalism, while those on the right appear more pro-Atlantic but also notably isolationist (Angelucci and Isernia, 2025, p. 243). It should also be considered that deep-rooted and, to some extent, cross-cutting pacifist social movements have been active for decades in the country (Catanzaro and Coticchia, 2018), and historically rooted hostile sentiments towards NATO and the U.S. (Fabbrini, 2002; Isernia, 2006) appear to remain active in certain segments of the population, and may find new vigour given the current transatlantic turbulent climate.

The analysis of the most recent developments adds to this overall picture, largely confirming it while introducing new elements.

Despite general concern, Angelucci and Isernia (2025) confirm a certain detachment from the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine conflicts, with neutrality being the preferred stance in both cases. Regarding the Middle East, a majority of Italians condemn Israeli military actions in Gaza, and across the political spectrum, with only slight majorities in favour of Israeli action among Brothers of Italy and Forza Italia voters, most voters prefer a neutralist position when asked to choose support between Israel and Hamas (Angelucci and Isernia, 2025, pp. 244-246). This reflects what the two researchers describe as «a widespread reluctance to take a firm stance on a conflict perceived as both polarizing and complex» (p. 245), but it should be noted that, for many, neutrality could have appeared to be the most moderate choice when faced with an option – supporting Hamas – that can be perceived as untenable. To a certain extent, this also confirms the tendency to perceive that conflict not as an abstract geopolitical dispute, but as a humanitarian emergency which also has, at least for certain segments of society, a strong moral and symbolic dimension: in Italy, like in many other countries, issues like social justice and anti-racism have fostered the politicization of the Palestinian scenario, fuelling protest movements that have entered into open controversy with the Meloni government, and have so been internalized within the domestic political debate (della Porta et al, 2025).

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict, conversely, shows higher levels of polarization, partly because of its more direct consequences for Italy, including European sanctions on Russia, rising energy costs, and the country's involvement in supplying weapons and assistance to Kyiv. According to Angelucci and Isernia's analysis (2025, pp. 246-248), Italian support for Ukraine is nuanced and fragmented: only voters of the Democratic Party (72%) and Forza Italia (52%) show an

absolute majority in favour of Kyiv; neutralist positions prevail among other political groups, particularly among supporters of AVS and the Five Star Movement, while League voters show the highest, though still limited, levels of support for Russia. In European comparison, furthermore, Italians appear, after Hungarians, among the most inclined to favour territorial concessions to end the conflict, to emphasize the economic costs of supporting Ukraine, and to attribute partial responsibility to the West for the outbreak of the war (Moise and Wang, 2025; Isernia, Martini and Cozzi Fucile, 2024; Thomson et al, 2023).

Such polarization can also be related to Italy's direct involvement in the conflict through military assistance and political support, which began under the Draghi government and has largely continued under the Meloni government (Bruno and Fazio, 2024), although frictions on this issue have frequently been observed even within the governing majority. In any case, widespread counter-narratives, high levels of distrust toward political and media institutions, and general scepticism towards national military engagement make it difficult to construct a shared and effective «strategic narrative». This contrasts with the relatively high levels of public support that characterized Italy's participation in multilateral military missions in previous decades, which benefited from their multilateral framework and peaceful and humanitarian purposes (Battistelli, 2004; Coticchia, 2014), a framing that appears more difficult to effectively mobilize in the debate surrounding the Ukrainian conflict. These dynamics likely explain the strategic choice of both the Draghi and Meloni governments to limit the public disclosure of information about the extent of Italian support to Ukraine, often invoking state secrecy or referring the issue to the broader European multilateral framework, and confirms the

traditional tendency of Italian governments to depoliticize international conflicts by minimizing their domestic political impact, preferring to frame them within more abstract categories (Angelucci, Martini and Cozzi Fucile, 2024; Angelucci and Isernia, 2025, pp. 250-252).

Nonetheless, value-based references also appear highly polarized. Although 'peace' is commonly identified as the main aspiration of Italians in international affairs, the term proves again to be highly polysemic in political debate.

It is not possible here to examine the innumerable meanings of "peace" and "pacifism" developed in political thought and practice (e.g. Bobbio, 1979; Bonanate, 1987; Cortright, 2008). It is sufficient to observe that the objective of 'peace' frequently appears in the statements of representatives of different national political lines regarding the ongoing conflicts; however, it is evident that different objectives and policy choices are associated with this term. For instance, while Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has invoked the motto «*si vis pacem, para bellum*» in support of rearmament (Ansa, 2025a), parties such as the Five Star Movement and the League have advanced more traditional pacifist arguments, including the trade-off between military and social spending, to oppose it (La Rocca, 2025; Ansa, 2025b). In the debate on the Ukrainian war, references to a «just peace» appear both within the government (e.g. Open, 2025; La Stampa, 2026) and the opposition, particularly in the communication of the Democratic Party (e.g. Partito Democratico, 2026); more isolationist parties, such as the League, instead emphasize peace primarily as the cessation of hostilities, without addressing the post-war political settlement (e.g. Fanpage, 2026), expressing an orientation that appears relatively widespread among European and Italian public opinion.

The concept of 'peace' therefore confirms its nature as an «essentially contested concept» (Gallie, 1955), whose meaning cannot be objectively determined and is interpreted differently depending on cultural backgrounds, ideological convictions, and political positions. What is certain is that international complexity has forced both the political elite and Italian public opinion to confront deep questions regarding the legitimacy of war, the meaning of pacifism, and the trade-off between a just peace and peace at any cost.

3. *Prudent and pragmatic, but aspiring to peace: Italians as «utopian realists» in the face of the return of war?*

Interpreting the global context through the lens of political realism generally leaves little space for public opinion, except as a constraint or potential support for decisions taken by governments on the basis of interests and security considerations. Classical realist thinkers such as Hans Morgenthau already emphasized that the need to secure public consent could limit the effectiveness of foreign policy in democratic systems (Morgenthau, 1949, p. 160). Likewise, Edward Hallett Carr argued that the belief that a rational public opinion could effectively restrain international conflict – what today might be described as «naming and shaming» – represented one of the main illusions of liberal thought (Carr, 2001, e.g. pp. 32-37).

Carr's reflections, however, are useful for interpreting not the influence of public attitude on foreign policy making, which is not the actual focus of this analysis, but rather the broader opinion mood of Italians in the face of the contemporary international scenario. Although public opinion is far from homogeneous and includes significant

differences stemming, for instance, from political positioning, survey data nevertheless allow us to identify broad attitudes that characterize significant portions of society and actively shape public debate, to which interpretative criteria may thus be applied.

From this perspective, the prevailing mood appears to reflect the tension between realism and utopia which, according to Carr, structurally and inherently characterizes the political dimension. Carr's thought, moreover, developed primarily in the period immediately preceding the outbreak of the Second World War, which, despite his professed realism, the British author was unable to foresee, perhaps remaining trapped in that very tension between recognition of reality, wishful thinking, and ideal aspirations that he himself diagnosed. In any case, his insight on his own time captures structural elements of the relationship between international politics, especially in its conflictual dimension, and the public sentiment, which can provide useful interpretative lenses for understanding the anxieties and hopes that shape Italians' attitude toward the current international scenario.

Among the elements of that sentiment that can be associated with a realist attitude, attentive to the pragmatic evaluation of facts and their consequences, one may identify the distrust toward universalistic narratives and the moral categories of international politics; a reading of the international scenario marked by substantial prudence; and prioritization of self-preservation, which, however, also appears to reflect a tendency to offload burdens and responsibilities.

Distrust toward the Western political narratives, nuanced attitudes toward the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, and support for collective security frameworks that often appears more pragmatic than ideological depict a country primarily concerned with adapting to shifting power relations and

perceived threats rather than with their moral or ideological representations, the resonance of which is certainly undermined by the broader climate of distrust, primarily rooted in the domestic context, toward the political and media system that should serve to interpret and convey the complexity of international politics, albeit within the legitimate diversity of ideas and positions. Similarly, the limited willingness to sustain economic and/or personal costs and sacrifices in the name of the security requirements posed by the difficult international context may be interpreted as an expression of that pacifist attitude which Carr, in his 1936 Inaugural Lecture as Wilson Professor of International Politics at the University College of Wales – devoted precisely to «public opinion as a safeguard of peace» – described as a manifestation of the primordial human instinct to «take refuge from the monster in the nearest available cave» (p. 848). It would then reflect the desire of many individuals to «wash their hands of it» when the prospect of war becomes more concrete, an attitude that Carr did not attribute to cowardice but rather to an attempt to evade responsibility (p. 848). This interpretation may also apply to the general support for alliance frameworks such as NATO and the European Union. Beyond the different degrees of support for European and transatlantic integration, there certainly emerges a tendency to favour forms of burden sharing in terms of risks and costs. This tendency may be motivated by a certain inclination toward free riding, demonstrated, for instance, by the deeply rooted opposition to increasing national defence spending, but also by a prudential awareness of the impossibility, for a middle-ranking power, of facing the current scenario and future risks in an atomized manner. Carr's 1936 lecture can help, once again, to highlight a relevant aspect: to what extent would this general attitude, which he defined as the one of the

«collectivists» (Carr, 1936, p. 852), mobilize Italians if a concrete application of collective security were required? In other words, if the ideal support were translated into practice «by the terrible monosyllable "war"» (Carr, 1936, p. 858), what would be the position of Italians, and what that of political parties, including those that most actively support the country's membership in the Atlantic and/or European framework? According to Carr, in the UK of the 1930s the moral support for the League of Nations, widespread especially among intellectuals, would have shattered against its actual implications: indeed, when faced with the prospect of a true military engagement «the man in the street quite firmly put his foot down – so firmly that the avoidance of war became, Covenant or no Covenant, the first preoccupation of every member of Parliament» (1936, p. 858). An indication of how such a reaction might unfold today in Italy, should the activation of these mechanisms be requested, can be found in the previously mentioned survey which shows that 42.7% of respondents believe that Italy should not intervene militarily in defence of another NATO or EU country if it were attacked (Censis, 2025b, p. 12).

Despite these ambiguities, the most evident element in Italian public opinion remains the aspiration for peace. Often this aspiration seems to take the form of negative peace, understood as the absence of war, although some social groups, particularly those mobilized around the Gaza crisis, emphasize elements of positive peace such as equality, rights, and inclusion, reflecting what Norberto Bobbio described as «active pacifism» (1979, p. 56). Moreover, while it is true that Italians appear concerned and sceptical about the ability of democracies and of a rules-based international order to cope with the emergence of a system grounded in power, the results of the Polidemos and Ipsos Doxa survey show that, ultimately,

it is precisely these solutions to which many of them aspire in imagining a more stable and peaceful future.

Overall, the underlying pattern still resembles the form of pacifism described by Battistelli (2004, p. 148) as «coherent in its logic and stable over time», a «value orientation that is translated from time to time into political evaluation» without presupposing an absolute aversion to the use of force. However, this value orientation seems to be translated into practice through at times inconsistent impulses between neutralism and reliance on international alliances, between active moral rejection of violence and the mere distancing from responsibilities, between principled positions and the difficulty of confronting the practical consequences that follow from them.

Carr argued that the most valuable contribution to peace that he could offer was the promotion of a more accurate understanding of international relations and the formation of «a balanced and informed public opinion on international problems» (1936, p. 847). The contemporary international environment indeed demonstrates how public opinion has increasingly become a battlefield for competing narratives and propaganda: the quality of debate on international matters is therefore crucial, although the formation of a well-informed public opinion appears today even more difficult than in Carr's time, who himself identified «power over opinion» as one of the main forms of power, alongside economic and military ones (2001, pp. 120-135). Nevertheless, his notion of utopian realism reminds us that power over opinion is never absolute, as it can be constrained «by the inherent utopianism of human nature», which leads individuals to a natural intellectual resistance against overly aggressive forms of propaganda (Carr, 2001, pp. 129-130). Overt and covert tools for influencing opinions are today deeply

more pervasive and unpredictable than in Carr's time, but his insights can still speak meaningfully to contemporary audiences.

Ultimately, applying these interpretative lenses to the mood of Italian public opinion allows us to observe how, even in the current context, a democratic society may oscillate between the realist recognition of power relations and the idealistic aspiration for peace. It is precisely this tension and ambivalence that seems to characterize the way in which a significant portion of Italian society looks at international politics in a historical phase that, although profoundly different, reproduces, especially in Europe, some of the anxieties and uncertainties that marked the international debate of the period in which Carr developed his reflections.

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The Meloni Government and "External Constraints": International Institutions as Facilitators of Radical-Right Governance

VALERIO ALFONSO BRUNO[1] AND ENRICO FASSI[2]

Abstract. Much of existing scholarship treats organisations such as the European Union (EU) and NATO as "external constraints" that moderate populist radical-right parties (PRRPs), even as recent contributions have begun to question this assumption. We argue that this expectation rests on increasingly fragile assumptions about the coherence of supranational institutions and the persistence of a shared liberal-democratic consensus. This chapter examines when and how international institutions cease to constrain and begin to facilitate radical-right governance, specifically when the normative coherence of supranational institutions erodes and when radical-right actors command sufficient credibility to engage institutionally rather than contest from outside. Empirically, we develop a theory-building case study of Italy under Giorgia Meloni's government (2022 onwards). We show how a strategy of pragmatic ambivalence, combining international conformity with domestic radicalism, enables the use of EU frameworks to consolidate and diffuse illiberal policies. Migration policy, and in particular the "Albania model" and its endorsement at the European level, provides the clearest empirical illustration, while parallel developments within the EU and NATO indicate that this transformation extends beyond the Italian case.

[1] Valerio Alfonso Bruno, Department of Political Sciences, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, valerioalfonso.bruno@unicatt.it

[2] Enrico Fassi, Department of Political Sciences, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, enrico.fassi@unicatt.it.

Keywords: Italy; Populist Radical Right; external constraint; external facilitator; reverse Europeanisation; migration externalisation; illiberalism; Meloni government; NATO; democratic backsliding; pragmatic ambivalence.

1. *Introduction*

Governments pursuing radical political agendas are rarely unconstrained. A large body of scholarship has demonstrated how, especially in democratic countries, domestic institutions such as courts, constitutional frameworks, and checks and balances can limit the scope of illiberal governance. External constraints, particularly those exercised by supranational organisations such as the European Union (EU) and the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), have been widely understood as reinforcing these dynamics by disciplining governments and incentivising compliance with liberal-democratic norms (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004). Within this perspective, these external constraints ("*vincolo esterno*" in the specific connotation of the Italian case) have been interpreted as a stabilising force capable of moderating the behaviour of populist radical-right parties once in office (Diodato, 2014; Diodato and Marchetti, 2023).

This article argues that this assumption no longer holds. Recent developments across Europe reveal a pattern that existing theories struggle to account for. Populist radical-right parties in government increasingly comply with the formal requirements of EU and NATO membership while simultaneously pursuing domestically illiberal agendas (Mudde, 2017; Pirro, 2023). At the same time, policy innovations initially advanced by these actors, particularly in the field of migration, are not merely tolerated but progressively legitimised and diffused at the European level

(Meunier and Vachudova, 2018; Rivera Escartin, 2020). External constraints do not simply fail to moderate. Under specific conditions, namely the erosion of normative consensus within supranational institutions and the adoption of formal compliance strategies by radical-right governments, they actively enable.

This article explains when and how this shift occurs, and under what conditions it can be reversed. We argue that the moderating effect traditionally attributed to supranational institutions depends on a set of background conditions, including the coherence of their normative architecture and the persistence of a shared liberal-democratic consensus among member states (Meunier and Vachudova, 2018). As these conditions erode, external constraints are transformed. Rather than disciplining governments through conditionality and socialisation, they become resources that can be strategically instrumentalised by radical-right actors to consolidate domestic power and project their preferences beyond the national level.

To theorise this transformation, we introduce the concept of the "external facilitator". We conceptualise a three-stage process through which international institutions evolve from external constraint to contested constraint and ultimately to external facilitator. This transformation is driven by three mechanisms, namely i) pragmatic adaptation, ii) legitimation, and iii) policy projection. Together, these mechanisms underpin a process that we define as reverse Europeanisation, through which domestic radical-right preferences are uploaded onto the supranational arena, reshaping both policy outputs and normative boundaries.

We develop this argument through an in-depth case study of Italy under Giorgia Meloni's government from 2022 onwards. Italy represents a most likely case for the operation of

the vincolo esterno, and by the same logic a least likely case for the argument advanced here, given its long-standing reliance on external constraints as a disciplining device (Diodato and Marchetti, 2023). A successful demonstration of external facilitation in this least likely case constitutes particularly strong inferential leverage for the argument. We show how the Meloni government combines international conformity with domestic radicalism, a governing formula that can be defined as pragmatic ambivalence, and how this strategy enables the systematic instrumentalisation of EU frameworks, particularly in migration policy. We further illustrate how these dynamics extend beyond the national level, contributing to shifts within EU institutions and interacting with the changing role of NATO in a context marked by the erosion of its liberal-democratic anchoring function (Lucarelli, 2020; Parsi, 2021).

This chapter makes three contributions. First, it analyses Giorgia's Meloni's government providing a theoretically grounded account of contemporary radical-right governance that highlights the strategic interaction between domestic and international arenas. Second, it advances the literature on Europeanisation by identifying a reverse dynamic through which domestic (radical) preferences are projected onto the EU level. Third, it reconceptualises the role of international institutions in processes of democratic backsliding, showing that they may operate not only as constraints but also as enablers of illiberal governance.

2. *Methodology and Theoretical Framework*

The chapter develops a theory-building, single-case study designed to explain the conditions under which external constraints cease to moderate and begin to facilitate radical-

right governance. The empirical analysis focuses on Italy under Giorgia Meloni's government from 2022 onwards. As argued in the Introduction, Italy is best understood as a least likely case for the argument advanced here: precisely because external constraints are expected to be strongest there (Diodato and Marchetti, 2023), demonstrating their transformation in this context provides strong inferential leverage. Moreover, Fratelli d'Italia, by far the largest party within the governing coalition and the one holding the premiership, derives from a post-fascist radical right tradition and represents the first party of this kind to exercise stable leadership in a "major" EU member state, thereby providing a useful case for assessing potential analogous developments in countries such as France or Germany.

Conceptually, the article engages with the literature on the Populist Radical Right while situating it within the broader category of the Far Right (Mudde, 2017; Pirro, 2023). The Populist Radical Right is defined by nativism, authoritarianism, and illiberalism, whereas the Far Right captures a wider spectrum of actors characterised by nationalism and the rejection of liberal democratic norms, including more extreme and anti-democratic variants (Jupskås and Leidig, 2020; Mudde, 2004; Mudde, 2021; Palano, 2022a; Weyland, 2017). This distinction allows us to account for both ideological continuity and internal differentiation within the political space under examination. Fratelli d'Italia occupies a position at the boundary between the two categories: its organisational lineage in post-fascism (Broder, 2023; Bruno and Downes, 2023; Vampa, 2023) places it at the harder end of the radical-right spectrum, while its governing behaviour since 2022 reflects the strategic moderation associated with PRRPs more broadly (Baldini, 2024). For the purposes of this article, the "external facilitator" argument applies specifically to actors that combine ideological radicalism with institutional engagement, a configuration

characteristic of PRRPs rather than of the extreme or anti-system right.

The analysis builds on the literature on democratic backsliding and Europeanisation, which has highlighted the growing contestation of liberal norms within the EU and the increasing role of illiberal actors in shaping supranational outcomes (Campati, 2022a; Campati, 2024; Meunier and Vachudova, 2018; Rivera Escartin, 2020). While this literature has identified important dynamics of norm erosion and informal Europeanisation, it continues to treat international institutions primarily as constraints. This article departs from that assumption by theorising the conditions under which these institutions may instead enable illiberal governance (Kelemen, 2021).

We conceptualise a three-stage transformation of international institutions. In the first stage, external constraint, supranational institutions operate through conditionality and socialisation, incentivising compliance with liberal-democratic norms (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004). In the second stage, contested constraint, formal rules remain in place but their enforcement becomes selective, allowing for a decoupling between formal compliance and domestic practice (Meunier and Vachudova, 2018). In the third stage, external facilitator, supranational frameworks are no longer primarily constraining but become resources that can be strategically instrumentalised by radical-right actors. As mentioned, this transformation is driven by three mechanisms. First, pragmatic adaptation refers to the strategic alignment of governments with supranational expectations at the formal level, without corresponding norm internalisation. Second, legitimation captures the process through which supranational endorsement or tolerance validates domestic illiberal policies. Third, policy projection describes the upward transfer of domestic policy preferences to

the supranational level, contributing to the redefinition of common policy frameworks. Together, these mechanisms constitute a process that we define as reverse Europeanisation. While the term "reverse Europeanisation" has been used in the broader Europeanisation literature to describe the bottom-up uploading of domestic preferences to the EU level, we employ it here in a more specific sense: to capture the illiberal content of the preferences uploaded, the radical-right identity of the actors driving them, and the structural erosion of normative consensus that makes the upload possible. This usage is therefore analytically distinct from standard accounts of preference uploading associated with conventional Europeanisation processes in liberal or technocratic contexts (Moravcsik, 1993). The transition to "external facilitator" is conditioned on three structural prerequisites: (i) declining normative coherence within the supranational institution; (ii) the presence of radical-right actors in government who adopt strategies of formal compliance rather than open contestation; and (iii) the availability of institutional frameworks amenable to reinterpretation. Where these conditions are absent, for instance where normative consensus remains strong or where radical-right actors choose confrontation over accommodation, the constraint function is expected to persist. The Orbán case, examined in Section 5, illustrates the latter.

The Italian case allows us to trace these mechanisms empirically across key policy domains, particularly migration, and to observe their interaction with broader shifts within the EU and NATO. While the analysis focuses on a single case, the framework is generalisable to other contexts in which radical-right actors operate within, rather than against, supranational institutional structures.

3. *The Meloni Government: Pragmatic Ambivalence in Practice*

Many populist radical-right parties in Western Europe have exhibited at least partial moderation once in government, though the degree and durability of such moderation vary considerably across cases (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015; Capaul and Ewert, 2021; Wondreys and Mudde, 2022). The Italian case appears, at first glance, to conform to this pattern. Before the 2022 elections, the steady rise of Fratelli d'Italia in opinion polls foreshadowed the possible formation of the most right-wing governing coalition in the history of the Italian Republic, and thus raised concerns about Italy's domestic policies and its international positioning, especially in relation to the EU and NATO.

Following the elections, Fratelli d'Italia adopted a more pragmatic stance towards the EU, both to strengthen its influence within European institutions and to ensure the effective management of NextGenerationEU funds (Albertazzi and Zulianello, 2022; Baldini, 2024, p. 408). The governing coalition reflects this logic. It brings together two populist radical-right parties, Fratelli d'Italia and Matteo Salvini's Lega, alongside the more moderate Forza Italia, affiliated with the European People's Party. While often described as centre-right, we characterise the coalition as radical right, given the electoral and ideological dominance of Fratelli d'Italia within it and the party's programmatic priorities since entering government (Albertazzi, Bonansinga and Zulianello, 2021; Bruno, 2022; Bruno and Morini, 2026; Baldini, 2024; Vampa, 2023; Vassallo and Vignati, 2022; Verbeek and Zaslove, 2015).

At the international level, the government's behaviour is consistent with the moderation thesis. The transition from the Draghi to the Meloni government took place without mayor shifts in Italy's foreign policy, or significant changes in Italy's

formal commitments within the EU and NATO. Notably, Italy's position on the war in Ukraine remained broadly aligned with that of its allies, notwithstanding internal tensions within the coalition (Cozzolino and Giannone, 2021; Giannone and Cozzolino, 2023). More generally, the government has maintained a strategy of alignment with European and transatlantic partners, reflected in improved relations with the European Commission and in the promotion of initiatives framed as compatible with European priorities (Bruno and Fazio, 2023; Coticchia and Catanzaro, 2022).

This pattern illustrates what we define as pragmatic adaptation. The government aligns with international/supranational expectations at the formal level, thereby preserving credibility and access to institutional resources, without necessarily internalising the underlying liberal-democratic norms. Moderation, in this sense, is not an outcome but a strategy. We distinguish the two empirically by examining the divergence between external and domestic policy trajectories: genuine moderation would produce convergence across both arenas, whereas strategic moderation produces alignment externally and radicalisation domestically, which is precisely the pattern observed in the Italian case.

At the domestic level, a series of measures adopted since 2022 point indeed towards a more radical and illiberal agenda. These include restrictions on the Reddito di Cittadinanza welfare scheme (Decree-Law 48/2023), limitations on NGO rescue operations at sea (Decree-Law 1/2023, the so-called "Decreto ONG"), the constitutional reform separating the careers of judges and prosecutors (approved by Parliament in 2024, but rejected by a referendum in March 2026) – unfolding in a context of escalating tensions with the judiciary, and new security legislation expanding state authority in the management of protests and public order (Law 104/2023, the

so-called "Decreto Sicurezza"). Additional initiatives further indicate a broader attempt to reshape institutional balances. The proposed constitutional reform introducing the direct election of the Prime Minister ("premierato") was advanced but stalled in parliamentary committee, while the Differentiated Autonomy Law (Legge Calderoli, Law 86/2024) was substantially curtailed by the Constitutional Court (ruling no. 192/2024), a reminder that domestic institutional resistance remains a real countervailing force (Albertazzi and Vampa, 2024; Bull and Polverari, 2025; Campati, 2022b). In addition, the Meloni government exhibits features associated with the radical right particularly in the cultural and security domains. It promotes traditional family values and adopts restrictive positions on civil rights (e.g. limits on the recognition of children of same-sex couples, restrictions on surrogacy), especially regarding LGBTQ+ issues. These policies are reinforced by nationalist and identity-based rhetoric (e.g. references to "ethnic replacement," initiatives defending the Italian language), framing politics around the defense of the nation, cultural homogeneity, and opposition to globalization and immigration.

This divergence between international alignment and domestic radicalisation is not contradictory. It reflects a coherent governing strategy that we define as pragmatic ambivalence. International moderation and domestic radicalism operate as complementary dimensions of the same political logic. External constraints are not resisted but accommodated at the formal level, allowing governments to secure legitimacy, resources, and room for manoeuvre, while pursuing more contentious agendas domestically.

Crucially, this configuration creates the conditions for the transformation of external constraints into facilitators. Formal compliance with EU and NATO frameworks, as well as foreign

policy alignment with the main partners enhances the credibility of the government, reduces the likelihood of external sanction, and provides a source of legitimation for domestic policies in line with the logic of "two levels game" (Putnam, 1988). At the same time, it enables the strategic use of supranational frameworks as instruments of policy justification and projection. Italy thus provides a clear empirical illustration of the transition from external constraint to contested constraint. The "vincolo esterno" continues to operate, but its effects are increasingly limited to the international dimension, while domestic trajectories diverge. This decoupling between formal (external) alignment and substantive (domestic) practice is precisely what makes possible the subsequent shift towards external facilitation, which we examine in the following sections.

4. *Migration Policy as a Platform: The Albania Model and Reverse Europeanisation in Practice*

Migration policy provides the most analytically revealing empirical case for the argument developed in this article. It is in this domain that the three mechanisms of reverse Europeanisation, namely pragmatic adaptation, legitimation, and policy projection, can be most clearly observed, and where the transformation of the EU from external constraint to external facilitator is most advanced. The Italian case shows not only that supranational institutions fail to constrain radical-right governance, but that they can actively enable and diffuse it.

Pragmatic adaptation and selective accommodation

The starting point of this process lies in the domestic consolidation of a restrictive migration agenda combined with continued formal alignment with EU frameworks. Upon entering office in October 2022, the Meloni government faced a sharp increase in irregular arrivals, with sea arrivals reaching 157,651 in 2023 (Geddes and Hadj-Abdou, 2023); arrivals subsequently declined to approximately 65,600 in 2024, a trend that underscores the contingent, rather than structural, nature of migration pressure. The government responded through a series of decree-laws that restricted legal pathways, curtailed NGO rescue operations, and expanded the use of accelerated border procedures.

These measures generated significant legal and political contestation at the domestic level, including repeated rulings by Italian courts that questioned their compatibility with both constitutional provisions and EU asylum law (Antoniazzi, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024). However, this contestation was not matched at the supranational level. European Union institutions did not intervene as effective constraints. Instead, they tolerated and accommodated these measures, thereby allowing a decoupling between formal compliance and domestic practice. This configuration illustrates the mechanism of pragmatic adaptation. The Italian government maintained formal alignment with European Union norms while pursuing policies that stretched or reinterpreted their substantive content. In doing so, it preserved its position within the European framework while expanding its room for manoeuvre domestically.

Legitimation and the Albania model

The second mechanism, legitimation, becomes visible with the Italy–Albania Protocol of November 2023. The agreement established Italian-managed facilities on Albanian territory for the processing of asylum claims under Italian jurisdiction (De Leo and Celoria, 2024). Rather than presenting the initiative as a departure from EU law, or as an open challenge to the European approach, echoing the rhetoric of Fratelli d'Italia during its time as a small opposition party, the Italian government framed it as an extension of European legal frameworks beyond the Union's borders. This shift was accompanied by a corresponding shift in communication, with greater visibility given to joint initiatives involving Meloni and von der Leyen, such as the "Team Europe" missions to Tunisia (June 2023), the EU–Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding (July 2023), and their coordinated response to the Lampedusa migration crisis (joint visit in September 2023) (Echeverria, Finotelli 2024, 241-242).

This framing was reinforced by the reaction of EU institutions. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen publicly endorsed the initiative, and the European Commission formally concluded that the Protocol fell outside, rather than in violation of, European Union law, on the grounds that it operates under Italian rather than EU jurisdiction (CEPS, 2023). This distinction, while formally narrow, had significant political implications. It signalled that the initiative was compatible with the broader direction of European policy. This is a clear instance of legitimation. European Union endorsement provided political validation for a policy that had originated at the national level and that significantly expanded the logic of externalisation. The effect was not merely to tolerate

the Italian approach, but to normalise it within the European policy space.

Policy projection and diffusion at the European level

The third mechanism, policy projection, is observable in the subsequent diffusion of the Italian model. Following the Albania agreement, other member states began exploring similar arrangements, and externalisation became a central component of migration debates in countries such as Germany. More broadly, Italian policy preferences were progressively incorporated into the EU's external migration agenda. This dynamic is particularly evident in the interaction between the Italian approach and the New Pact on Migration and Asylum adopted in 2024. The Pact expanded the use of safe third country concepts and strengthened the external dimension of migration policy, promoting cooperation with third countries on returns and border control. Rather than constraining national initiatives such as the Albania model, it generalised their underlying logic (Migration Policy Group, 2024; Arnoux Bellavitsa and Ripoll Servent, 2025). Italy's role in this process was active rather than passive: the Meloni government consistently advanced externalisation proposals in the European Council: Prime Minister Meloni co-signed joint letters to the Commission in favour of external processing in June and September 2023, organized ad hoc informal meetings with EU leaders to talk about 'innovative solutions', and Italian officials participated centrally in the final negotiating rounds of the Pact (Morucci, 2024).

A similar pattern can be observed in the Italy–Africa strategy known as the Piano Mattei. Launched in 2024 and subsequently embedded within the EU's Global Gateway framework, the plan links development cooperation and

migration control, reinforcing the externalisation approach. The incorporation of this strategy into European Union funding instruments further illustrates how national policy preferences are projected onto the supranational level.

Contestation, limits, and adaptive responses

The trajectory of the Albania model also highlights the limits and contestation of this process. In practice, the facilities established in Albania have been used only minimally, with Italian courts repeatedly ordering the return of transferred migrants to Italy (ECFR, 2025). The Court of Justice of the EU further constrained the legal basis of the model in its 2025 ruling on safe country designations. However, these constraints do not invalidate the argument. Rather, they demonstrate that the transformation from constraint to facilitator is neither linear nor uncontested. What matters is not the operational success of the policy, but its political and normative effects. The Albania model contributed to redefining what is considered acceptable within European migration policy and positioned Italy as an agenda-setter at the European level: at least six EU member states, including Germany, the Netherlands, and Denmark, announced or explored comparable externalisation arrangements in 2024, and the Commission's 2025 proposal to amend the Asylum Procedures Regulation explicitly cited the need to accommodate approaches akin to the Albania model (ECFR, 2025). Importantly, the response to legal constraints has not been retrenchment but adaptation. Italian authorities have adjusted the use of the Albanian facilities, while European Union institutions have explored regulatory changes to accommodate similar approaches, including proposals to revise the application of safe country concepts (EU Law Analysis, 2026; Arnoux Bellavitsa and Ripoll Servent, 2025). This iterative

process further reinforces the dynamic of reverse Europeanisation.

From "constraint" to "facilitator"

Taken together, these developments illustrate the full sequence of mechanisms identified in the theoretical framework. Pragmatic adaptation enables governments to remain within the European institutional framework while pursuing radicaldomestic policies. Legitimation by supranational actors validates these policies and reduces their political costs. Policy projection then allows these preferences to be uploaded to the European level, reshaping common policy frameworks. In this sense, migration policy provides a clear empirical demonstration of the transition from external constraint to external facilitator. The EU does not simply fail to constrain radical-right governance. It becomes part of the process through which such governance is normalised, diffused, and, ultimately, institutionalised.

5. *The European Union: Shifting Equilibria?*

The transformation of external constraints into facilitators is not only observable at the level of national policy, but is also rooted in broader changes within the EU's political and institutional equilibrium. The 2024 European Parliament elections provide a critical juncture for understanding these dynamics.

While pre-election expectations pointed to a potential breakthrough of far-right forces, the results were more nuanced. The three mainstream pro-European groups, the European People's Party, the Socialists and Democrats, and

Renew Europe, retained a combined majority. At the same time, however, the radical and far right reached an unprecedented level of representation, with 187 Members of the European Parliament, corresponding to approximately 26 per cent of the assembly (Mudde, 2024). This expansion did not translate into full cohesion, as far-right actors remained fragmented across multiple groups, including the European Conservatives and Reformists, Patriots for Europe, and the Europe of Sovereign Nations. The significance of these developments lies less in immediate institutional control than in their structural and normative effects.

The growing presence of radical-right actors within European institutions contributes to redefining the boundaries of what is considered legitimate within the European policy space. This shift operates not through overt institutional rupture, but through gradual normalisation and accommodation (Leidig, 2020; Mondon and Winter, 2020a; Mondon and Winter, 2020b). Within the EP specifically, this dynamic is visible in voting patterns on migration, rule of law, and fundamental rights, where the expanded far-right presence has altered coalition arithmetic for the centre-right majority (Mudde, 2024; Hadfield and Demir, 2024). At the level of Council dynamics and interstate bargaining, the perspective of liberal intergovernmentalism illustrates how European integration reflects the aggregation of member state preferences shaped by domestic political process (Moravcsik, 1993). As Meunier and Vachudova (2018) argue, the rise of illiberal actors across member states alters these preferences, shifting contestation from policy choices to the underlying normative foundations of the European project. The result is an increasingly fragmented normative environment in which liberal-democratic consensus can no longer be taken for granted (Palano, 2020).

This erosion of consensus has two key implications for the argument advanced in this article. First, it weakens the capacity of the EU to act as a coherent source of external constraint. Conditionality becomes more difficult to enforce in a context where member states themselves diverge on core normative commitments. Second, it creates opportunities for radical-right actors to exercise influence from within institutions, rather than merely contesting them from the outside. These dynamics are particularly visible in the field of migration policy. As discussed in the previous section, the Italian approach to migration has received not only tolerance but active political support from EU institutions. This support reflects a broader convergence among member states around more restrictive and externalised approaches to migration governance. In this context, the preferences of radical-right actors are no longer marginal but increasingly central to policy formation.

Beyond vertical dynamics between member states and institutions, horizontal interactions between governments also play a crucial role. As highlighted by Rivera Escartin (2020), processes of informal and illiberal Europeanisation enable governments to project their preferences onto the European level through networks of like-minded actors. Rather than withdrawing from the EU, these governments seek to reshape it from within, aligning supranational outcomes with their domestic agendas. This combination of vertical and horizontal dynamics contributes to the transition from contested constraint to external facilitator. The EU does not cease to function as an institutional framework, nor does it abandon its formal commitment to liberal-democratic norms. However, the internal balance of power shifts in ways that make it increasingly receptive to illiberal preferences. In this context, radical-right actors can operate as legitimate agenda-setters,

influencing both the content and direction of European policies.

The result is a structural transformation of the European Union's role. Instead of acting primarily as a constraint on national governments, it becomes a site through which domestic political dynamics are aggregated, normalised, and projected. This transformation is central to the process of reverse Europeanisation identified in this article, and provides the broader institutional context within which national cases such as Italy can be understood.

Table 1 – European Parliament elections, figures at constitutive session. 2019: 748 MEPs (pre-Brexit, UK included). 2024: 720 MEPs. Far-right groups in italics. Source: European Parliament official results

Group	*Orientation*	*2019*	*2024*	*Change*	*Share 2024*
EPP European People's Party	Centre-right	182	188	+6	26.1%
S&D Socialists and Democrats	Centre-left	154	136	–18	18.9%
Renew Europe Liberal / centrist	Liberal centre	108	77	–31	10.7%
PfE *Patriots for Europe*	*Far right*	*73 (as ID)*	*84*	*+11*	*11.7%*

Group	*Orientation*	*2019*	*2024*	*Change*	*Share 2024*
(successor to ID)					
ECR *European Conservatives & Reformists*	*Radical right*	*62*	*78*	*+16*	*10.8%*
Greens / EFA Greens / European Free Alliance	Green / regionalist	74	53	–21	7.4%
The Left (GUE/NGL) United European Left	Left	41	46	+5	6.4%
ESN *Europe of Sovereign Nations (new 2024)*	*Far right / nationalist*	*,*	*25*	*new*	*3.5%*
NI Non-attached members	Mixed / unaffiliated	54	33	–21	4.6%

Group	*Orientation*	*2019*	*2024*	*Change*	*Share 2024*
Total seats		748 (incl. UK)	720	,	
Far right total (PfE + ECR + ESN)		*135 (ID+ECR)*	*187*	+52	26%

The Italian governing coalition provides a salient case study of these broader dynamics. As Table 1 illustrates, the 2024 European Parliament elections confirmed a significant rightward shift, with the three far-right groups, Patriots for Europe, the European Conservatives and Reformists, and the Europe of Sovereign Nations, securing a combined 187 seats, approximately 26 per cent of the Parliament, a historic high. At the same time, this expansion has been accompanied by persistent fragmentation. Rather than consolidating into a unified bloc, the far right remains divided across competing groupings that differ in their ideological profiles, their strategic orientations towards European institutions, and their relationships with the mainstream centre-right, particularly the European People's Party.

This combination of expansion and fragmentation is analytically significant. The increasing presence of radical-right actors within European institutions contributes to the normalisation of their policy preferences, while fragmentation prevents direct institutional capture. The result is a configuration in which influence is exercised not through dominance, but through selective alignment with mainstream actors. In particular, the consolidation of the European People's Party as the largest group, combined with the

electoral decline of liberal and green forces, creates incentives for strategic interaction between the centre-right and segments of the radical right.

Within this context, two distinct models of far-right influence can be identified, associated respectively with Giorgia Meloni and Viktor Orbán (Bruno and Morini, 2026). The Orbán model is characterised by open contestation of supranational institutions, an explicit commitment to illiberal democracy, and a strategy of confrontation that positions the EU as an external constraint to be resisted. By contrast, the Meloni model is based on engagement from within. It combines ideological continuity with strategic moderation at the international level, allowing radical-right actors to operate as credible partners within European institutional settings

This distinction is central to the argument advanced in this article. The transformation of external constraints into facilitators does not occur under conditions of open confrontation, but through processes of accommodation and alignment. The Meloni model illustrates how radical-right actors can leverage supranational frameworks to enhance their legitimacy and expand their influence, while avoiding the costs associated with direct institutional conflict. In a fragmented far-right landscape, this strategy may prove more effective than confrontational sovereignism, as it enables agenda-setting and policy projection within, rather than against, the EU. Preliminary evidence of the model's replicability emerges from comparable strategic pivots by other PRRPs: Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National has progressively abandoned Frexit rhetoric in favour of EU reform from within, while in the Netherlands the PVV-led coalition under Wilders has engaged with EU institutions rather than pursuing confrontation. Whether these cases constitute genuine instances of the

Meloni model or merely tactical repositioning remains a question for future comparative research.

6. *A Trump's Effect? NATO, the United States and the Radical Right*

The transformation of external "constraints" into "facilitators" is not limited to the EU. It also extends to the transatlantic dimension, where changes in the role of the United States and the internal dynamics of NATO have altered the Alliance's capacity to function as a liberal-democratic anchor. Historically, NATO has been interpreted not only as a military alliance but also as a political community grounded in shared liberal-democratic norms (Lucarelli, 2020; Parsi, 2021). During and after the Cold War, membership and enlargement were formally linked to democratic standards, contributing to the consolidation of the broader Liberal International Order (Ikenberry, 2018). Although this role has always been uneven (Poast and Chinchilla, 2020; Rubinson, 2021), it has nonetheless underpinned the expectation that NATO could act as an external constraint on illiberal political trajectories among its members.

This expectation has become increasingly difficult to sustain. The election of Donald Trump in 2016 and, more decisively, the developments associated with his second term have contributed to a weakening of NATO's normative foundations. While the first Trump administration did not fundamentally alter the Alliance's institutional functioning (Carati and Locatelli, 2023; Locatelli and Carati, 2023), it introduced a significant shift in its normative environment. The public legitimation of authoritarian leaders and the erosion of democratic norms within the United States itself reduced the credibility of NATO as a community of liberal

democracies (Carothers, 2017; Fassi, 2021; Fassi and Zotti, 2018; Ikenberry, 2018).

These trends have intensified in the context of Trump's second presidency. The domestic trajectory of the United States, characterised by increasing pressure on institutional checks and balances and a more confrontational approach to liberal-democratic norms, has projected a powerful signal at the international level. At the same time, shifts in foreign policy, particularly with regard to Russia and the war in Ukraine, have further undermined the perception of NATO as a cohesive and normatively anchored alliance. The implications for NATO's role as an external constraint are significant. As the normative coherence of the Alliance weakens, its capacity to exert pressure on member states in defence of liberal-democratic standards diminishes. In parallel, the growing emphasis on burden-sharing and defence spending, exemplified by the adoption of a new 5 per cent GDP target at the 2025 Hague Summit, reflects a shift towards a more transactional and security-driven conception of the Alliance. While this shift may reinforce NATO's military dimension, it further sidelines its normative function.

This transformation creates a structural environment that is more permissive for radical-right actors. For Italy specifically, the shift in NATO's normative environment has had measurable implications. The Meloni government increased defence spending towards the 2% GDP target, signalling transatlantic credibility, while simultaneously maintaining ambivalent positions on Ukraine aid, reflecting internal coalition pressures from Lega's historically pro-Russian sympathies (Fasola and Lucarelli, 2024; Isernia, Martini and Cozzi-Fucile, 2024). This combination illustrates the same logic of pragmatic ambivalence identified in the EU context: formal compliance with Alliance commitments without full normative

alignment. Without a strong and credible transatlantic anchor, the external constraints traditionally associated with NATO become less effective in shaping domestic political trajectories. Rather than operating as a source of moderation, the Alliance increasingly reflects the preferences and priorities of its member states, including those shaped by illiberal political dynamics.

In this sense, NATO mirrors the broader pattern identified in this article. It does not cease to exist as an institutional framework, nor does it formally abandon its commitment to democratic values. However, the erosion of its normative coherence reduces its constraining capacity and contributes to widening the political space available to radical-right governments. The external constraint is not simply weakened. It is transformed into a more permissive and, under certain conditions, enabling environment.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the first three years of the Meloni government, focusing on the role of international institutions in shaping the behaviour of populist radical-right parties. It has argued that the conventional view of supranational organisations such as the EU and NATO as external constraints on radical and illiberal governance is no longer sufficient. Rather than functioning as stable and exogenous sources of moderation for its members, these institutions are themselves subject to transformation. Their constraining capacity depends on political and normative conditions that can erode over time.

The analysis has shown that this transformation follows a specific trajectory. External constraints do not simply weaken. Under the conditions identified in the theoretical framework,

they are reconfigured into external facilitators. This shift is driven by three mechanisms: pragmatic adaptation, through which governments maintain formal compliance without norm internalisation; legitimation, through which supranational endorsement normalises domestic illiberal policies; and policy projection, through which national preferences are uploaded to the international/supranational level. Together, these mechanisms underpin a process of reverse Europeanisation that reshapes both policy outcomes and normative boundaries.

The Italian case illustrates how this transformation operates in practice. The Meloni government combines international alignment and moderation with domestic radicalism in a strategy that can be defined as pragmatic ambivalence. This configuration does not represent a deviation from the logic of external constraint, but rather its evolution under changed structural conditions. Formal compliance with European Union and NATO frameworks secures legitimacy and access to resources, while simultaneously enabling the pursuit and projection of illiberal agendas. Migration policy, in particular, demonstrates how radical ideas and initiatives advanced at the national level can be legitimised, diffused, and ultimately incorporated into the European policy framework.

Beyond the Italian case, the article has shown that these dynamics are embedded in broader structural changes. Within the EU, the growing presence and normalisation of radical-right actors, combined with the erosion of liberal consensus, has altered the balance of power and the direction of policy development. Within NATO, the weakening of its normative foundations and the shift towards a more transactional logic, amplified by the second Trump administration, have reduced its capacity to act as a liberal-democratic anchor. Taken together, these developments indicate that the transformation of external

constraints is not confined to this specific case, but reflects a wider reconfiguration of the international environment.

These findings carry important implications for the study of democratic backsliding. If international institutions can function not only as constraints but also as enablers, then analyses that treat them as inherently stabilising risk overlooking a central dimension of contemporary political change. Understanding democratic erosion in Europe requires attention not only to domestic factors, but also to the ways in which supranational frameworks are instrumentalised, adapted, and, in some cases, repurposed (Youngs et al., 2025). At the same time, this transformation is neither linear nor irreversible. The interaction between domestic and international dynamics remains contingent and open-ended. The fragmentation of the far right, the persistence of institutional veto points, and the possibility of renewed liberal convergence, for example in the form of a partnership of the like-minded" middle powers advocated by Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney in his 20206 Davos address (New York Times, 2026), all represent countervailing forces that may limit or reshape these trends.

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Environmental Policy as a Test of Democratic Commitment: Time Inconsistency and Conflict Avoidance in Italy under the Meloni Government

MATILDE ZUBANI[1]

Abstract. This chapter examines environmental policy under the Meloni government as a lens through which to assess the capacity of democratic systems to sustain credible long-term commitments. Focusing on Italy, it argues that recent policy developments are best understood not as simple retrenchment or policy reversal, but as the outcome of two interacting dynamics: time inconsistency and conflict avoidance. Climate policies generate concentrated short-term costs and diffuse long-term benefits, creating incentives for governments to recalibrate commitments over time. At the same time, politically sensitive trade-offs are often managed through institutional and discursive mechanisms that reduce their visibility, including multi-level governance, temporal postponement, and strategic framing. The Italian case shows how environmental commitments can be formally maintained while their substantive content is progressively reshaped in practice. This pattern allows governments to navigate distributive conflict without fully politicising it, but at the cost of reduced transparency and weakened democratic accountability. More broadly, the chapter suggests that environmental policy provides a particularly demanding test of

[1] Matilde Zubani, Department of Political Sciences, Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Largo A. Gemelli, 1 – 20123 Milan, Italy, matilde.zubani@unicatt.it

democratic commitment in contexts characterised by economic constraint, electoral pressure, and complex governance structures.

Keywords: environmental policy; time inconsistency; conflict avoidance; democratic accountability; Italy.

1. *Introduction: Environmental Policy and the Limits of Democratic Commitment*

Over the past three years, environmental policy has become an increasingly salient domain through which to observe the evolving dynamics of Italian democracy. Under Giorgia Meloni's government, Italy has operated in a highly constrained context marked by geopolitical instability, energy insecurity, inflationary pressures, and the implementation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), the EU-funded programme designed to support post-pandemic recovery through investments and reforms. In this setting, environmental policy sits at the intersection of European constraints, domestic distributive tensions, and long-term policy commitments.

Environmental policy under the Meloni government should not be understood simply as a domain of policy inconsistency or partial retrenchment. Rather, it reveals a broader difficulty within the Italian political system in sustaining credible long-term commitments under conditions of distributive conflict, external constraint, and electoral pressure. Environmental policy is especially revealing in this respect because its intertemporal structure and uneven distributive effects make these tensions particularly visible.

Italy has formally maintained its commitment to ambitious environmental and climate objectives, largely anchored in European Union frameworks and in the ecological transition pillar of the NRRP. At the same time, however, implementation

has been marked by delays, recalibrations, and selective revisions. Developments concerning the revision of the NRRP, the political framing of the Green Deal, and the redefinition of energy priorities suggest that environmental commitments have remained formally in place while being progressively reshaped in practice.

The question, therefore, is not simply whether the current government has been more or less supportive of environmental policy, but what the Italian case reveals about the ability of democratic systems to sustain long-term commitments in contexts marked by economic constraints and political trade-offs.

The analysis developed here interprets environmental policy as a test of democratic commitment, understood as the ability of political institutions to maintain intertemporal policy trajectories despite changing incentives. As a policy domain characterised by diffuse long-term benefits, concentrated short-term costs, and high implementation complexity, environmental policy provides a particularly demanding test of this capacity.

More specifically, this chapter argues that two dynamics interact. The first is time inconsistency: policies that are optimal ex ante become politically costly ex post, once their distributive implications become salient (Kydland & Prescott, 1977). Climate policy is particularly vulnerable to this dynamic because it involves immediate and often concentrated costs, while its benefits are long-term and diffuse (Helm et al., 2003; Levin et al., 2012). The second is a logic of conflict avoidance: instead of openly politicising environmentally costly choices, political actors often displace, postpone, or technicise conflict, especially through multi-level governance and regional implementation. This pattern is consistent with broader accounts of blame avoidance and depoliticisation, in which

governments seek to minimise the visibility of politically costly decisions by shifting responsibility across institutional levels or framing them in technical terms (Weaver, 1986; Flinders & Buller, 2006). The result is not the absence of politics, but a form of attenuated politicisation in which environmentally relevant decisions are frequently recalibrated without becoming the object of clear democratic choice.

In the Italian case, this issue emerges in a particularly clear way. On the one hand, recent research points to a stable and centralised governing structure, characterised by strong leadership, limited intra-coalition conflict, and a concentration of decision-making power in the executive (Bull & Polverari, 2025; Borghetto et al., 2025; Cavalieri et al., 2024). On the other hand, environmental policy displays persistent signs of recalibration, selective implementation, and strategic ambiguity (Pizzimenti, 2024).

The chapter proceeds by first reconstructing the trajectory of environmental policy under the Meloni government, focusing on patterns of policy adjustment and implementation. It then situates these developments within the broader political economy of climate policy, before examining how distributive conflict translates into political pressure through voter preferences, organised interests, and public narratives. The final step of the analysis shows how these pressures are mediated through governance practices that reduce the visibility of conflict, with implications for democratic accountability.

2. *Environmental Policy in Italy under the Meloni Government: Recalibration, Drift, and Strategic Ambiguity*

Italy's environmental policy trajectory under the Meloni government is best understood as a process of progressive recalibration rather than abrupt policy change. Long-term commitments are formally maintained, but their substantive content is reshaped through implementation choices, resource allocation, and political framing. This dynamic reflects the interaction between structural features of Italian governance, European constraints, and the increasing political salience of environmental issues.

A key element of this configuration is the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), which combines substantial financial resources with a dense system of conditionalities, timelines, and targets defined at the European level. Rather than a purely external constraint, the NRRP is better understood as a jointly constructed commitment device, combining European conditionality with prior national negotiation. In principle, such a framework should strengthen policy commitment by limiting the scope for subsequent discretionary change. In practice, however, the Italian case reveals a more ambivalent outcome.

While the government has formally reaffirmed its commitment to the NRRP and its ecological transition component, it has simultaneously engaged in a process of selective revision and reallocation of priorities. Investments related to environmental protection, particularly those concerning ecosystem resilience, hydrogeological risk, and territorial prevention, have been scaled back, postponed, or restructured (Pizzimenti, 2024). These adjustments have taken place in a context characterised by inflationary pressures, energy price volatility, and broader economic uncertainty,

which have increased the salience of short-term constraints relative to long-term planning.

This dynamic is also visible in the government's response to sectoral pressures. During the protests of agricultural workers in early 2024, explicitly mobilised against the perceived costs of European green policies, the Prime Minister acknowledged that "European agricultural policy had to change" and announced an increase in NRRP resources for the sector from five to eight billion euros (Sky TG24, 2024a). This episode illustrates more broadly how distributive pressures translate into immediate policy adjustments, reinforcing a pattern in which environmental commitments are maintained formally but recalibrated in practice.

Environmental shocks further reinforce this pattern. Flood events across northern and central Italy have exposed long-standing vulnerabilities in territorial governance. Recent research on the Marche and Emilia-Romagna floods suggests that extreme weather events have increased media attention to climate change, but also that their interpretation remains politically contested, with different actors emphasising climate causes, land management, or territorial vulnerabilities in different ways (Imperatore & Frazzetta, 2023). While such events could strengthen support for preventive environmental policies, they also generate immediate demands for compensation and reconstruction, shifting attention toward short-term responses and reinforcing a reactive policy style (Pizzimenti, 2024). More generally, such dynamics point to a reactive policy style – rooted in longer-standing features of Italian governance – in which environmental shocks do not necessarily strengthen long-term commitment but instead reinforce the salience of short-term responses and resource reallocation.

Energy and industrial policy provide an even clearer illustration of these tensions. The government has maintained formal commitments to decarbonisation while simultaneously emphasising energy security, technological neutrality, and the protection of industrial capacity. This shift is also reflected at the institutional level, most notably in the renaming of the Ministry of Ecological Transition into the Ministry of Environment and Energy Security (MASE), which signals a rebalancing of priorities and a more explicit integration of energy security concerns within environmental policy. This positioning has been articulated explicitly in public discourse. Speaking at the 2024 Confindustria assembly, Prime Minister Meloni warned that "decarbonisation pursued at the cost of deindustrialisation is a debacle" and that the ecological transition cannot come at the expense of employment and industrial production (Energia Italia News, 2024).

These concerns are not abstract. The automotive sector alone employs over one million workers across the Italian value chain and accounts for a substantial share of industrial output and national income, making it one of the most economically sensitive sectors to climate policy (ANFIA, 2025). In this context, policy choices concerning decarbonisation are inevitably tied to employment, competitiveness, and territorial stability. Taken together, these developments suggest that, in the Italian case, as in other European contexts where climate policies generate distributive pressures, environmental policy is continuously reshaped through the interaction between external constraints and domestic distributive pressures, rather than through explicit policy reversal.

Italy's positioning at the European level provides a clear illustration of these dynamics. In late 2025, Meloni joined other European leaders in calling for a revision of EU automotive regulation to preserve hybrid technologies and biofuels beyond

2035, arguing against what was described as "ideological dogmatism" in climate policy and warning that "there is nothing green in an industrial desert" (Corriere della Sera, 2025). This stance reflects a broader attempt to reconcile environmental objectives with industrial competitiveness. More broadly, it is embedded in a public discourse that has increasingly framed the European Green Deal as excessively rigid or "ideological", emphasising its perceived risks for industrial competitiveness and economic sustainability (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2025b).

A similar pattern emerges in Italy's opposition to specific European measures. In June 2024, Italy voted against the Nature Restoration Law, a central component of the Green Deal, in a context marked by agricultural protests and concerns over the economic impact of environmental regulation (Sky TG24, 2024b). Here again, environmental commitments were evaluated through the lens of their distributive consequences.

These dynamics are further reinforced by the increasing – though still partial – politicisation of climate change in Italy. Recent research points to rising salience and broader actor involvement, but also to uneven patterns of polarisation and the persistence of depoliticizing tendencies in parts of the debate (Biancalana et al., 2023). Government discourse has consistently framed climate measures in terms of economic costs and social impact, emphasising risks for households, firms, and employment. At the same time, this politicisation does not necessarily lead to open confrontation. Political actors often combine discursive contestation with practical conflict containment.

A central role in this process is played by multi-level governance. The interaction between European obligations, national decision-making, and regional implementation creates multiple arenas in which policy choices can be adjusted, delayed, or reframed. Regional governments, in particular, have

played an active role in shaping how environmental measures are applied.

Policies related to air quality and mobility provide a clear example. Restrictions on Euro 5 diesel vehicles in the Po Valley – measures with significant distributive implications – were postponed from 2025 to 2026, their scope reduced, and regions were allowed to adopt alternative measures to meet EU targets (Fratelli d'Italia, 2025; Il Sole 24 Ore, 2025a). The decision was explicitly justified in terms of protecting families, workers, and small businesses from disproportionate costs.

Tensions between the central government and northern regions over air-quality governance further illustrate these dynamics. In 2025, Piemonte, Lombardia, and Veneto – regions governed by centre-right coalitions – challenged national implementation measures before the Constitutional Court, opposing a framework that assigned them primary responsibility for meeting EU standards while exposing them to potential sanctions. As reported by Il Sole 24 Ore, this dispute was closely linked to the politically sensitive issue of emission limits and traffic restrictions in the Po Valley (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2025a).

Taken together, these developments point to a pattern of structured policy drift. Environmental commitments are not abandoned, but they are progressively reshaped through recalibration, selective implementation, and strategic ambiguity, reflecting the interaction between external constraints, domestic political pressures, and institutional characteristics, while reducing the visibility of political choices and complicating processes of accountability.

3. *Time Inconsistency and the Political Economy of Climate Policy*

The concept of time inconsistency provides a useful framework for interpreting the patterns observed in the previous section, particularly the recurrent adjustment of environmental policy commitments. Policies that are optimal when adopted may become politically costly once their distributive implications become visible (Kydland & Prescott, 1977). In the case of environmental policy, this dynamic is particularly pronounced due to the asymmetry between immediate costs and long-term benefits.

Climate policies generate uneven effects across sectors and regions. While their aggregate benefits are broad, their costs are concentrated among specific groups. In Italy, this asymmetry is especially evident in sectors such as automotive and energy, where large numbers of workers and firms are directly exposed to the transition. As noted above, the automotive sector alone involves more than one million workers and represents a substantial share of national output (ANFIA, 2025), making it a focal point of political sensitivity. More broadly, these dynamics are consistent with findings showing that the political contestation of climate policy is not driven only by the material concentration of costs, but also by how these costs are interpreted and framed, often as imposed by external or elite-driven agendas (Lockwood, 2018). As these costs become visible, political incentives shift. Under the Meloni government, this has translated into repeated adjustments to policy trajectories, particularly in areas affecting mobility, energy pricing, and industrial regulation. The postponement of diesel restrictions, the recalibration of NRRP measures, and the emphasis on technological neutrality all reflect this shift.

The labour market constitutes a key channel through which these dynamics operate. The green transition creates both winners and losers, and individuals exposed to the risks of decarbonisation are less likely to support environmental policies (Cavallotti et al., 2025). In the Italian context, this dynamic is amplified by regional disparities and limited opportunities for economic adjustment, particularly in industrial areas.

The persistence of the so-called "job-killing argument" is therefore not surprising. As Vona (2019) shows, concerns about employment losses have a disproportionate impact on political acceptability. In Italy, these concerns have been explicitly articulated in political discourse, particularly in relation to industrial policy and energy transition, reinforcing the salience of short-term costs.

Compensation mechanisms can mitigate these dynamics, but their effectiveness depends on their design and credibility. While the increase in NRRP funding for agriculture in response to protests suggests a recognition of distributive pressures, compensation has remained uneven and often reactive rather than systematic. This limits its ability to stabilise long-term political support for environmental policies.

Taken together, these elements suggest that time inconsistency in environmental policy is not simply a technical problem of commitment, but a structural feature of democratic governance. In the Italian case, the interaction between distributive conflict, electoral considerations, and institutional constraints has produced a policy environment in which long-term commitments are continuously adjusted in response to short-term pressures.

4. *From Distributive Conflict to Political Pressure*

The distributive dynamics described above become politically consequential when they are translated into public debate, electoral considerations, and pressure from organised interests. In Italy, this translation does not take the form of a fully structured political cleavage, but it is clearly visible in the way environmental policy has been framed and managed under the Meloni government.

Environmental policy has been increasingly politicised through its association with economic costs and social impact. More broadly, recent research shows that Italian parties frame the energy transition through competing discursive logics aligned along the left-right spectrum, with environmental, economic, and national-security considerations combined in different ways and further sharpened by the war in Ukraine (Campolongo et al., 2023). Government discourse has emphasised risks to industrial competitiveness, employment, and household purchasing power, framing environmental policy as a domain of trade-offs rather than purely technical necessity. Statements such as Meloni's warning against "deindustrialisation" linked to climate policy illustrate how these concerns are articulated at the highest political level (Energia Italia News, 2024).

This framing is reinforced by broader political and economic pressures. The protests of agricultural workers, the sensitivity of energy prices, and the importance of sectors such as automotive all contribute to shaping the political environment in which decisions are made. Policy choices in areas such as mobility restrictions and energy policy are therefore influenced not only by environmental objectives, but also by their potential electoral impact. This is consistent with evidence showing that support for climate policies in Italy varies significantly by policy instrument,

with taxes proving much less acceptable than subsidies, which helps explain why distributive concerns quickly become politically salient (Cabeza et al., 2023).

A similar dynamic can be observed in the energy domain. In response to energy price volatility, the government has adopted a range of measures within the so-called "Decreto Bollette" (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2026), including the extension of the coal phase-out timeline to 2038 beyond the targets set in the national energy and climate plan. This indicates that distributive conflict does not remain confined to sectoral dynamics but is translated into broader political pressure through its potential electoral and economic implications.

In this context, electoral considerations operate less through direct ideological confrontation and more through anticipatory adjustment. The postponement of diesel restrictions in the Po Valley and the recalibration of NRRP measures can be interpreted as responses to anticipated opposition in socially and economically vulnerable areas.

Organised interests play a complementary role in shaping these dynamics. Firms and industry associations have actively contributed to framing environmental policy debates, particularly by emphasising competitiveness and cost concerns (see also Errichiello et al., 2025; Errichiello et al., 2026). The position expressed by Confindustria in 2024, and supported by the government, highlights how economic actors influence both the substance and the narrative of environmental policy (Energia Italia News, 2024). In this sense, organised interests do not simply react to policy change but actively contribute to shaping both the substance and the framing of environmental policy.

At the same time, political narratives influence public perception and behaviour. As recent research suggests, trust in government and the consistency of policy signals affect pro-

environmental behaviour (Duradoni et al., 2025). In the Italian case, the emphasis on pragmatism and economic caution may contribute to shaping citizen expectations and reinforcing the broader dynamics of policy adjustment.

Taken together, these elements show how distributive conflict is translated into political dynamics in Italy. Environmental policy is shaped by a combination of electoral sensitivity, organised interests, and political narratives, resulting in a pattern of continuous adjustments. These dynamics reinforce the incentives for policy adjustment identified in the previous section and help explain why environmental governance under the Meloni government is characterised by adaptation rather than stable long-term commitment.

5. *Multi-level Governance, Conflict Avoidance, and the Depoliticisation of Environmental Choices*

The dynamics discussed in the previous sections suggest that environmental policy in Italy is characterised by significant distributive tensions and political pressures. Standard political economy accounts of climate policy as a source of distributive conflict would lead us to expect that such tensions translate into visible political conflict, with affected groups mobilising and policy choices becoming the object of explicit contestation (see, for example, Bechtel & Scheve, 2013; Douenne & Fabre, 2022). However, the Italian case only partially conforms to this expectation.

While environmental policy has clearly become more politically salient, the resulting conflicts do not consistently take the form of open and sustained confrontation. Instead, a recurrent pattern can be observed in which politically sensitive

issues are managed, reshaped, or displaced before they fully emerge as visible conflicts. This pattern resonates with recent work highlighting processes of strategic depoliticisation in the Italian climate field, in which intermediary actors contribute to framing climate governance through technical, financial, and managerial discourses rather than overt political contestation (Arrigoni, 2023). This pattern is particularly evident when considering how the government has dealt with policies that carry clear distributive implications.

A central role in this process is played by the multi-level structure of environmental governance. The interaction between European constraints, national decision-making, and regional implementation creates a fragmented institutional environment in which responsibilities are distributed across different actors. Under the Meloni government, this structure has not only constrained policy choices but has also provided opportunities to manage politically costly decisions in less visible ways.

In practice, policies that could generate significant opposition at the national level are often reconfigured through regional implementation or administrative adjustment. As illustrated by the air quality and mobility measures discussed in the previous section, potentially contentious policies are frequently modified in advance, reframed in technical terms, or distributed across multiple institutional levels, thereby reducing their visibility as politically salient choices.

A similar mechanism can be observed in the relationship between the central government and regional authorities on environmental policy more broadly. Disputes over air quality plans, for example, have often been shifted into legal or administrative arenas, where they are reframed in terms of competences and implementation responsibilities rather than environmental priorities.

Related dynamics are also visible in the public narration of extreme weather events, where the interpretation of floods can shift attention between climate change, territorial fragilities, and institutional responsibilities, thereby shaping which conflicts become publicly visible and which remain displaced (Imperatore & Frazzetta, 2023). This displacement reduces the visibility of underlying conflicts and makes them less accessible to direct political debate.

Temporal strategies further reinforce this pattern. Policies with significant distributive consequences are frequently postponed, phased, or implemented with flexibility**,** allowing the government to reduce immediate political costs. In the Italian case, the emphasis on gradual transition and the repeated adjustment of implementation timelines reflect a broader attempt to balance environmental commitments with short-term political constraints, particularly in a context marked not only by inflation and energy price increases, but also by frequent electoral cycles and permanent campaigning dynamics.

These strategies are closely linked to the logic of time inconsistency. As discussed in Section 3, policies that are adopted in a context where long-term objectives dominate may become politically difficult to sustain once costs become visible. In the Italian case, rather than leading to explicit policy reversal, this tension often results in incremental adjustment and delay. This allows formal commitments to be maintained while their practical implications are softened.

Another important dimension concerns the way environmental policy is framed in political discourse. Under the Meloni government, references to "realistic transition," "technological neutrality," and the need to protect economic competitiveness have played a central role. These narratives allow policy adjustments to be justified without explicitly

presenting them as responses to distributive conflict. In this sense, environmental policy is not depoliticised in the sense of being irrelevant, but it is often presented in ways that obscure the underlying political trade-offs.

Recent measures such as the 2025 Security Decree (Decreto-legge n. 48/2025), which introduced stricter penalties for forms of public protest including road blockades frequently used by environmental movements, further suggest a tendency to manage conflict not only through policy adjustment but also through the legal regulation of dissent.

Taken together, these elements suggest that environmental governance in Italy is characterised by a form of conflict avoidance through institutional and discursive practices. Multi-level governance, regional discretion, temporal flexibility, and political framing all contribute to reducing the visibility of conflict and diffusing responsibility across actors.

From the perspective of democratic accountability and political competition, this pattern has ambivalent implications. On the one hand, it allows the government to navigate politically sensitive issues while maintaining stability and avoiding sharp confrontations. On the other hand, it reduces the transparency of decision-making processes and blurs the distinction between alternative policy options. When policies are continuously adjusted, postponed, or reframed, it becomes more difficult for citizens to identify clear alternatives and attribute responsibility.

In this sense, the Italian case under the Meloni government illustrates a form of democratic functioning in which politically costly decisions are not avoided but are less frequently presented as explicit choices between competing alternatives. Environmental policy remains a domain of significant political relevance, but the mechanisms through which it is governed tend to limit the emergence of visible and sustained conflict. This interaction between time inconsistency and conflict

management helps explain why policy adjustment can occur without corresponding levels of public contestation, and why environmental governance provides a particularly revealing perspective on the functioning of accountability and competition in contemporary Italian democracy.

6. *Conclusion*

This chapter has examined environmental policy under the Meloni government as a lens through which to assess the broader condition of Italian democracy. Moving beyond descriptive accounts of policy adjustment or political preference, it has argued that recent developments reflect a deeper structural tension inherent to democratic governance.

At the core of this tension lies the intertemporal nature of environmental policy. Climate mitigation requires governments to sustain long-term commitments in the face of immediate and unevenly distributed costs. The framework of time inconsistency helps to capture this difficulty, showing how policies that are optimal when adopted may become politically costly as their distributive consequences materialise. In this sense, environmental policy does not simply reveal shifts in political priorities; it exposes the limits of democratic systems in binding themselves over time.

At the same time, the Italian case suggests that these dynamics are not only expressed through policy reversal or open political conflict. A central finding of this chapter is that environmentally relevant tensions are often managed through mechanisms of adjustment that reduce their visibility. Policy recalibration, selective implementation, temporal postponement, and multi-level governance arrangements all

contribute to shaping outcomes without necessarily producing explicit moments of political contestation.

This combination of time inconsistency and conflict management has important implications. On the one hand, it allows governments to navigate politically sensitive policy domains while maintaining a degree of stability. On the other hand, it complicates the relationship between democratic responsiveness and accountability. When decisions are continuously reshaped or displaced across institutional levels, the capacity of citizens to identify clear alternatives and assign responsibility is reduced.

The contribution of the Italian case lies in making these dynamics visible. From this perspective, it points beyond sector-specific developments to broader challenges faced by democratic systems in sustaining credible long-term commitments under conditions of distributive conflict. It highlights, in particular, that the challenge for contemporary democracies is not only to design credible long-term policies, but also to sustain forms of political contestation that render these policies legible and accountable. Environmental policy, given its distributive and intertemporal structure, represents a particularly demanding test in this respect.

More broadly, the analysis suggests that similar tensions are likely to emerge across other policy domains characterised by long-term commitments and short-term costs. As democratic systems confront increasingly complex transformations—whether related to climate change, technological change, or economic restructuring—the question of how to reconcile responsiveness, commitment, and accountability will become ever more central.

From this perspective, environmental governance in Italy should not be seen as an isolated case, but as part of a wider pattern. It provides a useful point of observation for

understanding how democracies adapt, respond, and sometimes struggle when faced with policy challenges that require them to act not only in response to present pressures, but also with a view to long-term policy commitments.

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Dissent under Pressure: Legislative Restrictions, Pro-Palestinian Protests, and Government Discourse in Italy

MARGHERITA FARINELLA[1]

Abstract. This chapter investigates the changing landscape of protests and civic freedoms in Italy within the context of a broader decline in democratic openness across Europe and Western countries. After outlining recent protest waves in Italy – including labor disputes, climate activism, feminist mobilizations, and prison uprisings – the analysis considers how legislative measures, especially the security decrees enacted by the Meloni government have been criticized for limiting the right to assemble and political dissent. Particular focus is given to protests in support of the Palestinian people, which have been significant in scale, intersectionality, and faced repression and delegitimization worldwide. By examining government discourse during the 2025 Global Sumud Flotilla mission and its interception, the work illustrates how narratives have been used to discredit protesters and criminalize dissent. It concludes by questioning whether these repressive tactics threaten Italy's democratic foundations or if they might ultimately foster new, more inclusive forms of collective action.

Keywords: Freedom of Protest; Civic Space; Pro-Palestinian Protests; Security Decrees; Democratic Erosion.

[1] Margherita Farinella, PhD Candidate, Department of Political Sciences, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, margherita.farinella@unicatt.it

1. *An overview of the latest protests in Italy*

Between January and February 2026, clashes occurred between police and protesters involved in the eviction of the Askatasuna social center in Turin (Il Post, 2026). Similar confrontations took place during protests against the Olympic Games and the presence of US ICE and the US government in Milan (Redazione Milano, 2026). These events evoked images from the past, reminiscent of the anti-globalization protests of the 2000s or even the contentious politics of the 1960s and 1970s. In recent years, Italy has seen numerous demonstrations and protests, driven not only by various national, European, and global crises but also reflecting broader social and political tensions.

As Della Porta and Lavizzari (2022) describe, between April 2020 and December 2021, the protest cycle during the Covid-19 pandemic was marked by two distinct waves: the first mainly against specific lockdown measures, and the second focused on protests against the vaccination campaign and certificate. Since the 2008 economic crisis, protest surges have been closely linked to reforms, and pandemic containment measures did not significantly reduce labor protests. This period also saw increased participation from professional organizations and non-worker groups, alongside traditional union federations and grassroots unions (Pilati, 2025). The protests often involved cross-movement coalitions, strikes, and private sector labor protests (Dinev et al., 2025).

Moreover, the Non Una di Meno movement, an intersectional and trans-feminist movement active in Italy since 2016, continues to organize marches and demonstrations on key dates like November 25, the Global Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, and March 8, the International Women's Strike. These events are in response to ongoing

femicides in the country and advocate for greater rights, gender equality, and measures to combat gender-based violence. At the same time as progressive protests occur, however, reactionary ones call for cultural sovereignty, anti-gender and masculinity norms, and reject incorporating immigrants, LGBTQI+ individuals, and women's rights, amid a climate of insecurity where right-wing parties are gaining support. Both types of protests challenge the existing societal system and call for change, challenging the status quo (De Cristofaro and Pellegrini, 2025).

Other protests have occurred in prisons, which for years have suffered from overcrowding and "inhuman and degrading" (Antigone, n.d.) conditions. This situation has led to numerous cases of self-harm and suicides, violating Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, as cited in the petition and denounced in various reports by the Antigone Association. In March 2020, the suspension of visits and restrictions due to the pandemic worsened the situation, sparking over 40 protests and thirteen deaths. However, these issues have not resulted in structural reforms, even under progressive government coalitions (Gonnella, 2025), and in June 2025, protests erupted in prisons across several cities over overcrowding, extreme heat, and the lack of cooling options, creating difficult conditions for prison workers as well (Associazione Antigone, 2025).

As in many other countries, protests have been held in favor of climate justice, especially by younger generations. Looking back over the last 30 years, Andretta and Imperatore (2023) note how environmental protest campaigns have increased over time, though with different repertoires of action among the activists, characterized by a "combination of levels of informality, organizational destructuring, and disruption that have emerged as increasingly prevalent" and "more subject to coercive

intervention by the state" (p. 78, translated by the author). Recent protests by Ultima Generazione, Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion, and Greenpeace have polarized the debate through mainly non-violent, creative, and provocative actions – such as vandalizing artwork and blocking roads – aimed at grabbing media attention. In response, media outlets have focused on the conflict, often portraying protests negatively and shifting attention to the acts of protest rather than their underlying motivations. This has resulted in some newspapers adopting demonizing counter-narratives that belittle or generalize the movements' demands and proposals (Binotto and Terrana, 2025).

Finally, as we will observe later, protests by students and university staff increased in strength between 2023 and 2024, supporting the Palestinian people and urging boycotts in response to the Gaza genocide. These protests were typically met with police repression and often accompanied by false accusations of anti-Semitism, similar to what has occurred in other countries (Cini and Piazza, 2025).

2. *Legislative tools to regulate and repress dissent: protest as a public order problem and security threat*

Articles 17 and 21 of the Italian Constitution establish the right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression. The right to peaceful assembly is described by the OHCHR (2026) as:

> the right to hold meetings, sit-ins, strikes, rallies, events or protests, both offline and online. It serves as a vehicle for the exercise of many other rights guaranteed under international law, with which it is linked intrinsically and that form the basis for participating in peaceful protests. In particular this

> concerns the rights to freedom of expression and to take part in the conduct of public affairs (OHCHR, 2026).

Freedom of opinion and expression are also protected in Article 19 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Moreover, the right to collective action is guaranteed by European law through Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Article 6, paragraph 4, of the European Social Charter, and Article 28 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Forlivesi, 2025).

However, these rights should not be taken for granted. As noted by the CIVICUS Monitor Report in 2024, globally:

> protests to show solidarity with people in the OPT and climate change and environmental protests were particularly targeted, including through bans, disruption of protests and arrests of protesters, among other tactics to discourage people from gathering to have their voices heard (CIVICUS Monitor, 2024, p. 9).

In July 2022, Amnesty International launched the appeal "Protect the Protest" to remind governments that peaceful protests are not a threat but an opportunity. Amnesty International Italia, in a call to the Government expresses concern

> over attempts in recent months to limit people's right to freedom of peaceful assembly through, for example, cases of excessive or unnecessary use of force by police forces, denigrating and criminalizing rhetoric against activists and protesters, and the adoption of measures that appear to be aimed at discouraging activism and participation in protests (e.g. Law no. 80 of 9 June 2025, the so-called "Security Decree", Law no. 199 of 30 December 2022 on the prevention and fight against illegal gatherings, and Law no. 6 of 22 January 2024 on

> the defacement of cultural heritage) (Amnesty International Italia, n.d., Il testo dell'appello, translated by the author).

In fact, the 'security decree' follows other measures adopted during the Meloni government denounced to be targeting freedom of peaceful assembly and dissent, including the so-called 'anti-rave decree law' (CIVICUS Monitor, 2022), the 'eco-vandals' law, and the so-called 'gag law', which has been accused of limiting press freedom and the right to be informed (CIVICUS Monitor, 2024b).

Heavily criticized by jurists and associations, the Meloni government's security decree was officially approved by the Senate on June 4, 2025, and enacted into law on June 9 (Law No. 80 of June 9, 2025). It sparked concerns both nationally and internationally regarding freedom of expression and peaceful assembly in Italy:

> presented by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni as a vital step forward in the protection of vulnerable citizens and law enforcement, the decree has been widely condemned by critics as an excessive crackdown on civil disobedience and public assembly (International IDEA, 2025).

Between 2024 and 2025, numerous associations, opposition parties, civil society groups, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Michael O'Flaherty, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, and multiple UN Special Rapporteurs voiced concerns about the bill's provisions.

Criticisms from jurists have arisen both from the perspective of the use of the emergency decree-law – something not only used by the Meloni government –, which is both seen as inadequate for providing criminal sanctions for significant social issues and for overtaking the legislative role of the

Parliament, and from its specific content (Morrone, 2025; Dolcini, 2025; Zirulia, 2025; Forlivesi, 2025; Lonati and Melzi d'Eril, 2025). Specifically, they criticize the criminalization of political dissent through new offenses such as possession of terrorist material – which could be used to criminalize dissent on politically sensitive issues or even those conducting research activities –, the introduction of aggravating circumstances for damage caused during demonstrations or graffiti, and a new crime of road and rail blockades – clearly aimed at targeting specific types of protests, especially environmental demonstrations, indicating a certain intolerance for spontaneous collective dissent or actions involving outsiders.

The addition of aggravating circumstances and the new crime of rioting in prisons and detention centers for irregular migrants is seen as further restrictive of the right to protest for people already deprived of their freedom and living in harsh conditions, tending to criminalize social conflict and non-violent dissent. The Antigone Association, which monitors prison conditions, calls it the "greatest attack on the freedom of protest in the history of the Republic" (translated by the author), highlighting its impact on eco-activists, foreigners, opponents of major projects and workers' pickets, squatters, housing rights advocates, NGOs, sea rescue groups, prisoners, Roma communities, the light hemp supply chain, and activists across the board (Prencipe, n.d.). Moreover, Zirulia (2025) states that the decree aims to achieve two additional goals: "criminal repression of forms of hardship, poverty, and social marginalization" and "strengthening criminal protection for law enforcement" (p. 2, translated by the author), thereby creating a protective shield and once again targeting specific groups and movements. Together with the criminalization of political dissent, these three interconnected objectives, which are mainly preventative, would suggest a slowdown in breaking free from

the legacies of an illiberal past. Additionally, Lonati and Melzi d'Eril (2025) point out that this decree-law signifies an inversion of the constitutional paradigm that viewed the person as central and the executive as serving them, shifting instead towards allowing the executive to act freely while marginalizing the individual and subordinating them to the priorities of power.

Finally, a new security decree took effect on February 25, 2026, introducing measures on bladed weapons, youth violence, demonstrations, and law enforcement agencies. Regarding public demonstrations, a 12-hour preventive detention has been introduced, as well as stricter bans on access to sensitive urban areas and for individuals previously convicted of street violence (Redazione Wolters Kluwer, 2026). Released shortly after recent events involving protests, Della Ragione (2026) suggests this decree reflects a "confirmation of the widespread recourse to penal and sanctionary measures" (translation by the auhor), which seems at odds with the principle of criminal law as a last resort.

3. *The Protests for Palestine*

Recent protests supporting the Palestinian people present a notable case for examining freedom of protest. These demonstrations have occurred worldwide across Western and non-Western countries and have faced specific repression and delegitimization of participants. According to CIVICUS (2024a), nearly 10 percent of all recorded civic space violations in 2024 involved Israel, the OTP, and expressions of solidarity with the Palestinian people. Especially since October 7, 2023, following Hamas's attack and subsequent Israeli escalations in Gaza and Palestinian territories, protests for Palestine have been spreading globally. These protests involve various actors

and intersecting struggles related to the Palestinian issue. Participants have faced accusations of anti-Semitism and support for terrorism in several Western countries, often used to discredit protests and dissent. This instrumentalization has targeted migrants, descendants, and progressive, anti-racist groups, aiming to exclude those perceived as enemies of Western civilization, contributing to what Donatella della Porta describes as a 'moral panic' (Della Porta 2025 and 2024).

As reported by CIVICUS (2024a), in the US, pro-Palestine student protests with university encampments have resulted in restrictions on peaceful assembly, including over 3,200 arrests or detentions, punitive federal laws, restrictive university policies, and suspensions of students' chapters of Students for Justice in Palestine, often due to accusations of anti-Semitism and pressure from donors. Similar restrictions have occurred in numerous other countries – including France, Germany, Italy, Brazil, and others – with bans justified as 'security concerns', excessive use of police force – such as the use of batons, pepper spray, police dogs, and bulldozers at the University of Amsterdam in May 2024 –, removal of student encampments – as seen in Poland and Portugal – and arrests of activists, journalists, and even minors – as in Bahrain and Germany. Freedom of association has also been impacted by the suspension of funding to UNRWA and Israeli and Palestinian civil society organizations (CSOs) in several countries, and CSOs focusing on OTP have faced investigations and surveillance. Journalists killed in Israel – over 180 –, threats, vilification, dismissals for media coverage of human rights violations or in solidarity with Palestinians, the conflation of criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism and terrorism, restrictions on symbols like the keffiyeh scarf or slogans, and reprisals against activists, academics, and artists have been reported as restrictions of freedom of expression in various countries worldwide (CIVICUS, 2024a, pp. 14-16).

In Italy, protests in solidarity with Palestine – as della Porta et al. (2025) point out – have been persistent over time and very widespread across the entire country. Similar contentious actions have been spreading across nations, such as the movement of student encampments from the USA to other European and Western countries. These protests include student encampments, academic boycotts requesting the suspension of relations with Israeli universities and Italian companies involved in military or energy sectors, petitions, leafleting, and other awareness campaigns, as well as flash mobs, symbolic actions, road blockades, occupations, and demonstrations. A broad and diverse network of actors has been involved in these protests, including student groups, diaspora communities, trade unions, political organizations, religious groups, and civic associations. Students and young people have primarily led these efforts, with most protests originating from schools and universities in autumn 2023, mainly driven by left-wing student collectives and university-based organizations (Andretta and Imperatore, 2025).

The wave of protests supporting the Palestinian people was also marked by a strong sense of intersectionality, involving professionals, struggles, associations, and movements. Besides students, the protests included precarious researchers, professors, and university administrative staff, as well as various other professionals, forming cross-sector alliances within and outside universities. Past discourses and struggles converged in the fight for the Palestinian cause – from peace movements to anti-austerity protests, feminist, transfeminist, environmental, and LGBTQ+ movements – leveraging existing networks and organizations while also criticizing Israel and allied Western countries, in a coalition with student movements reminiscent of those from the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, as Della Porta et al. (2025) points out, these pro-Palestinian movements, quickly led by Young Palestinians and supported significantly by BDS

(Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) and other longstanding pro-Palestinian groups, second-generation activists, and racialized and migrant workers, have helped incorporate anti-racist and decolonial perspectives into peace movements, "thus serving as a critical space for emerging communities to assert their rights to exist and challenge the persistent colonial attitudes that continue to shape their lives in Europe" (della Porta et al., 2025, p. 251). Finally, since the protests on university campuses in the United States, the repression of pro-Palestinian demonstrations has intersected with the US government's effort to control teaching and research freedoms. Meanwhile, several Italian universities have called for ending collaborations with Israeli institutions, linking research work and academic freedom closely with dissent.

4. *Government Narratives and Delegitimization of Protestants Discourse During the Global Sumud Flotilla Mission*

It is interesting to analyze government discourses – or those of its members – during the voyage of the Global Sumud Flotilla (GSF) in 2025 – a coalition of international organizations and civil society composed of approximately 500 activists from over 44 countries, which set sail with the aim to break the siege and deliver humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip – and its interception and consequent arrest of the activists by Israel, as it is a period when street protests and both national and international media attention intensified.

Having started deploying activists and supplies, initially from the ports of Barcelona and Genoa in late August 2025, the mission of the GSF – not the first Flotilla, but the largest so far, with parliamentarians, politicians, and both national and international public figures (Newell, 2025) and supported by

widespread civil society participation – drew media and public attention. Social media also played a significant role in highlighting the boats' journey and its participants, leading to a large turnout among the Flotilla's so-called 'ground crew', which included activists, unions, students, and ordinary citizens who kept the spotlight on Gaza and the Flotilla as well as Israel's potential reactions, by sharing posts and information, actively participating in marches, and blocking roads, trails, and ports.

On September 19, 2025, strikes and demonstrations across Italy called by the CGIL occurred, preceding the general strike organized by the USB for September 22. These protests demanded "the need to stop all military intervention in the Strip, guarantee humanitarian corridors, secure the civilian population, support and guarantee the security of all ongoing humanitarian missions, including the Global Sumud Flotilla, as immediate priorities" (CGIL, 2025, translated by the author).

They also called for the suspension of trade and military agreements with Israel, urging governments and international institutions to stop the situation. Faced with the ongoing genocide in Gaza, continued occupations in the West Bank, the blockade of humanitarian aid causing starvation deaths, and Israeli military threats against GSF ship – carrying also Italian citizens – denouncing the inertia of the Italian government and the European Union in dismissing terrorism accusations against the crew and refusing to adopt effective sanctions or suspend relations with Israel, the USB declared a general strike for the 22nd (USB, 2025). Additional large protests occurred on October 2 and 3, following Israel's seizure of the GSF crew in international waters, with the COBAS calling for a general strike across all private and public sectors on October 3 (COBAS, 2025).

Defense Minister Guido Crosetto, in the government's urgent briefing to the Chamber of Deputies regarding the attacks that occurred within the Global Sumud Flotilla on September 25, 2025, following an attack on vessels in international waters south of Crete on the night of September 23-24, announced the deployment of the Italian Navy frigate Fasan and insisted that aid be delivered to Cyprus. He states that the Italian Government strongly condemns the attack on civilian vessels in international waters and recalls the fundamental values of the Republic:

> respect for international law, the protection of human life, the defense of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. I have already publicly reiterated that in a democracy, any demonstration and form of protest must be protected when it is conducted in compliance with international rules and law and cannot be suppressed with violence (Crosetto, 2025, transcribed and translated by the author).

On the same day, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni commented on Agorà broadcast on Rai 3, saying that she condemns the incident and that the Fasan ship is authorized to approach to provide rescue and assistance if necessary. However, she was keen to reiterate her opinion on the matter, referring to the GFS: "all of this is gratuitous, dangerous, irresponsible" (Meloni, 2025a, transcribed and translated by the author).

In his speech to the Chamber of Deputies on October 2, 2025, addressing the Government's communication on recent developments in the Gaza Strip, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Antonio Tajani (2025), emphasized the importance of condemning all forms of anti-Semitism. He specifically condemned those who call for the destruction of the State of Israel "from the river to the sea", a slogan that has evolved in meaning over the decades but is also

currently used heavily by Palestinians and protesters ("*from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free*") to demand an end to violence, call for peace, and advocate for an independent Palestinian state that includes the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (Il Post, 2023). Also on October 2, while boarding operations were still underway, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, who stated they would do everything possible, added that despite their efforts, she believes:

> all this will bring no benefit to the Palestinian people. On the other hand, I understand that it will bring a lot of inconvenience to the Italian people. [...] For an issue that seems to me to have little to do with the Palestinian issue and a lot to do with Italian matters, the unions are explaining this to us, because I would have expected that at least on an issue they considered so important, they would not have called a general strike on Friday, because the long weekend and the revolution do not go together (Meloni, 2025b, transcribed and translated by the author),

aiming to discredit the actions of the Flotilla, trade unions, and those participating in demonstrations and strikes in general.

On September 23, Matteo Salvini, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Infrastructure and Transport, and leader of the Lega, commented on the violence at Milan's Central Station during a Gaza solidarity strike that occurred the day before, suggesting as the Lega that all those organizing demostrations pay a deposit into personal bank accounts (Salvini, 2025a). He reiterated this idea on October 2 in an Instagram video, which sounded more like a threat:

> Now someone is exaggerating. Even in these minutes, clashes between protesters and police in Alessandria, train traffic blocked in Livorno with people lying on the tracks. These are not pro-Pal, these are pro-chaos. Today, the Guarantee Commission declared the strike called by the CGIL and ultra-

> left for tomorrow illegitimate. Landini seems to ignore it and carry on. Anyone who, I appeal to workers, damages and brings the country to a standstill in the name of an illegitimate strike will pay the consequences. More: since the law that provides for sanctions for who organizes and participates to illegal strikes dates back to 1990, and has ridiculous penalties, I have brought to the Council of Ministers to update these rules and these sanctions to 2025 because those who make mistakes pay. [...] (Salvini, 2025b, translated by the author).

While also wanting to show as reliable, these discourses reveal two main trajectories: one involves using anti-Semitism concern rhetoric to divert attention, and the other one appears aimed at discrediting and criminalizing protest. While the use of the first one may seem historically at odds, Nicola Guerra (2026) notes that contemporary far-right pro-Zionism in Italy and across Europe did not emerge solely from recent Islamophobia but has deeper origins. It is rooted in Cold War anti-communism, which views Israel "as a bulwark against Soviet-backed Arab nationalism, and later as a vanguard against Islam" (p.1), as well as in radical Westernism and admiration for ethnonationalist militarism. Secondly, regarding the rhetoric emerging from Meloni and Salvini's discourses and from the Lega proposal, it should be considered, as Rossella Selmini and Anna di Ronco (2023) note, that, beyond criminal repression, protesters face increased administrative sanctions and fines. And although these sanctions may appear milder, they effectively criminalize dissent, disproportionately impacting vulnerable groups. Ultimately, this criminalization occurs not only through laws but also through public and media narratives that portray social movements as threats, delegitimize their demands, and justify punitive measures.

5. *On actual and future protests*

The CIVICUS Monitor (2025) reports that the proportion of the European and Central Asian population living in countries with open or narrowed civic spaces has collapsed from 58.3% in 2019 to 26.5% in 2025. Countries such as France, Germany, and Italy saw their ratings decline from 'narrowed' to 'obstructed'. Globally, the right to protest faces ongoing challenges, even in long-standing democracies. This freedom intersects with many other rights, rooted in constitutional principles and international law, including freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. And, as demonstrated by protests supporting the Palestinian people, it is also closely linked to academic freedom.

In the past few years, Italy has witnessed a variety of protests: against measures to contain the pandemic, for climate change, and against gender-based violence; protests in prisons; demonstrations for international situations, such as the one in Iran or in the Gaza Strip; and protests against evictions. Last but not least, the organization of a 'Remigration Summit' by the far-right in the province of Milan in May 2025 and 2026 led to counter-mobilizations. Among these, the protests in support of the Palestinian people after October 7, 2023, are an interesting case to examine, as they have occurred in several countries around the world, with attempts to repress and discredit protesters, including in Western democracies, from crackdowns on US university campuses to several European countries. They also featured, at the national level, especially during the Global Sumud Flotilla mission, remarkable participation from the people and specific reactions from the Italian government.

During the Meloni Government, since 2022, various legislative measures have been introduced, from decrees targeting rave parties to those against damaging cultural

heritage, as well as security decrees approved in 2025 and 2026. Although rethorically justified by security concerns or the need to protect public property, these measures seem to often specifically impact certain groups and social movements, ultimately limiting foundamental freedoms such as of expression, dissent, peaceful assembly, and protest. The frequent use of decree-laws – not only used by this government – especially in situations lacking clear urgency, alongside the security provisions they contain, indicate an increased dominance of the executive branch, a shift that risks undermining citizens' capacity to challenge governmental actions.

Moreover, as Donatella della Porta (2025) notes, repression isn't limited to state policing; it also includes law-and-order alliances among politicians, mass media, and counter-movements, which exert a form of soft repression. In the context of pro-Palestinian protests across many Western countries, including Italy, "far-right groups and media outlets have often played an important role [...] as a supposed 'countermovement', by embracing narratives of support for Israel as a part of a wider anti-muslim discourse" (p. 4). Analyzing speech by Italian government members during the 2025 Global Sumud Flotilla mission and Israel's subsequent arrest of aboard activists – during a time of frequent, well-attended protests and disruptions via road, rail, and airport blockades – the government's efforts to dismiss and discredit protesters and their motives are evident. Consistent with Western moral panic, anti-immigration and Islamophobic policies by the far-right, frame these protests as anti-Semitic, they accuse protesters of disrupting and harming Italians, and allege that trade unions aim to do so on Fridays to extend the weekend. Matteo Salvini's Lega's proposal to introduce a bail also contributes to criminalizing the protests. While maintaining radical ideological positions, these discourses

appear both coherent with and functional to the gradual introduction of legal restrictions, thus reflecting a balance between change and continuity from the past that Pedrazzani and De Giorgi (2025) have also identified as characteristic of the Meloni government in other areas.

At last, what can be noted is that actual protests are marked by a strong intersectionality and are likely to continue this trend. This includes overlapping struggles such as climate change, feminism, war, colonialism, and global capitalism. The Palestinian cause especially highlights this intersection of oppressions, as noted on the GSF website, which states that they raise "against apartheid, racism, imperialism, colonialism, ecocide, and all systems of oppression" (Global Sumud Flotilla, n.d.). There is also intersectionality among the participants and organizations involved: protests include a wide range of actors, including universities, trade unions, civil society groups, and workers from various sectors; individuals from diverse backgrounds, both in national protests and within the GSF; and old and new networks. Finally, intersectionality spans different levels of protest, targeting the national government, the European Union, and the international arena. In this context, unions have shown to still be vital social actors, and the protests for Palestine and the Global Sumud Flotilla have likely reactivated people on major issues such as peace, social justice, civil rights, and the environment (CENSIS, 2025), with large participation and a strong youth protagonism (Andretta and Imperatore, 2025).

As many of these issues remain unsolved, a few questions about the resilience of democracy can be asked: will this cycle of protests lead to an increase in democratic tools, or will restrictive mesures dominate? Will the new laws cause escalation or spark new forms of dissent? Will pro-Palestinian protests offer a new space for political actors from different

groups – such as young people, second-generations and migrants – or their stigmatization will prevail? Repressive practices certainly affect the country's democratic stability. However, protests can counterbalance. In Tarrow's words (1989), "in the popular culture of capitalist democracies, it is common for people to associate disorder with breakdown and to link 'system support' with stability" but historically popular disorder has much more often accompanied the birth or expansion of democracy and "where there is a consensual basis for democracy and elites are not united around an anti-democratic project [...] disorder and democracy are not opposed" (p. 347).

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

VALERIO MOCCIA[1]

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

[1] Valerio Moccia, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, valerio.moccia@unicatt.it

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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Damiano Palano is Full Professor of Political Philosophy at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. He is Director of ASERI (Graduate School of Economics and International Relations) and Polidemos (Centre for the Study of Democracy and Political Change). For ASERI, he is also Director of the Master in Advanced Global Studies and Director for the Master in Advanced Public and Cultural Diplomacy for International Relations. His research focuses on democratic theory, populism and the transformations of contemporary political orders.

HYBRID ITALY
A Democracy amid Global Disorder

Damiano Palano (edited by)

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