

## **A Single Narrative: Culture and Media Under Giorgia Meloni**

**Article by Francesca De Benedetti**

December 5, 2024

Since Giorgia Meloni's rise to power, populist rhetoric and personal favourites have ransacked Italy's media and cultural sectors. Going on the attack while presenting a victim narrative has become the new norm to silence critical voices.

Italy's deteriorating freedom of speech exposes the most obvious gap between Giorgia Meloni's moderate image, which she sells in Brussels in cooperation with the centre-right European People's Party, and what has happened in Italy since the far-right leader came to office. The erosion of the rule of law – attempts to repress dissent, attacks on the judiciary, undermining press freedom – began in October 2022, in the very first days of her mandate. The media and cultural spheres are where Meloni's projected image has clashed most visibly with reality. Rarely does a day pass without press freedom watchdogs alerting the European Commission about some new governmental abuse of power in Italy.

### **Colonising culture**

Over the past two years, various ministers of Italy's right-wing coalition have been caught up in scandals. However, only culture minister Gennaro Sangiuliano has been forced to resign. While the outline of the scandal remains unclear, suspicion was triggered when the minister tried and failed to appoint businesswoman Maria Rosaria Boccia, with whom he admitted having had an affair, as his consultant.

Alessandro Giuli replaced Sangiuliano in September 2024. The new culture minister, who at the time of appointment was still an undergraduate, is known for the fascist eagle tattooed on his chest, for having joined the neo-fascist Meridiano Zero movement, and for misappropriating Antonio Gramsci's concept of "cultural hegemony" as far-right ideology. Considered an "organic intellectual" of the Meloni camp, Giuli was previously appointed as director of the National Museum of 21st Century Art (MAXXI) in Rome.

Sangiuliano and Giuli share the same plan, hatched before Meloni took office: to colonise the public sphere. In May 2022, Sangiuliano, then director of *TG2* – the main news bulletins programme for public television channel *Rai 2* – did not hesitate to present on stage at the Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) convention in Milan.

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A few months later, from the corridors of Sangiuliano's ministry, his undersecretary, Gianmarco Mazzi, made the government's intention to "change the narrative" explicit. The government began hinting at a change of management at RAI. Fratelli d'Italia used any pretext – including the "scandal" of a homosexual kiss on live TV – to push its director, Carlo Fuortes, to resign, which he finally did in May 2023. "The time has come to focus on new storytelling," said his replacement, Roberto Sergio.

From the outset, Giampaolo Rossi was Meloni's personal preference. Known for his blog on right-wing

daily newspaper Il Giornale's online portal, Rossi's Euroscepticism tips into pro-Russian sentiment. "Putin's sin is that he does not want to subject Russia to the dictates of the New World Order preached by Soros," writes the right-wing ideologue. Sergio appointed Rossi as director general with the tacit agreement that their roles would be reversed within a year, which indeed happened in September. And other figures close to Meloni such as Gian Marco Chiocci have taken leading roles at RAI.

But these positions are only one side of the story. A veritable takeover of public broadcasting has occurred under Meloni's government. Freeing RAI from political interference has always been an unresolved challenge in Italy. This was particularly evident during Silvio Berlusconi's premiership, especially with the purges of critical journalists known at the time as the "Bulgarian edict". Indeed, it was Berlusconi who normalised the post-fascist far right by including it in his own coalitions. But in pursuing this legacy, Meloni has surpassed the master. Under her government, what was supposed to be a "change of narrative" is quickly becoming a single narrative. The trajectory is exactly the opposite of the new European Media Freedom Act's vision of pluralism.

The opposition ironically refers to the public media as "TeleMeloni": *RaiNews 24* runs Meloni's party convention speeches in full without any journalistic mediation. Her speech broadcast from the right-wing Italian youth festival in Atreju, for example, lasted for an uninterrupted one hour and 10 minutes. *Gli appunti di Giorgia* ("Giorgia's Notes"), the prime minister's social-media addresses, run for half an hour without contextualisation or counterargument.

Meloni's allies enjoy the same visibility. RAI broadcast deputy prime minister and Lega leader Matteo Salvini's entire social media monologue, which attacked the Palermo prosecutor's office and its bid to imprison Salvini for denying the landing of 147 refugees in Lampedusa in 2019. In cases like this, where the RAI journalists' union protests against such programming, the public broadcaster comes under attack from the governing coalition.

Meloni's colonisation of RAI goes hand in hand with the censorship and dismissal of prominent figures who criticise the government. The internationally renowned writer Antonio Scurati, author of a tetralogy on Mussolini and fascism, intended to read a monologue on RAI written especially for 25 April, the anniversary of Italy's liberation from Nazism and Fascism. In an actual example of censorship, the speech, which also criticised the government, was suddenly cancelled. The director of RAI later said that Serena Bortone, the TV presenter who reported on the episode, "should have been fired" and complained that she had not been "punished". Bortone no longer appears on television and has since joined public radio.

## **Against dissent**

The prime minister likes to call herself an "underdog". In her self-defined cultural myth, Meloni portrays herself as the outsider who somehow turned her fortunes around despite the world being against her. "The Left has often mocked me because of my working-class roots. They have called me a fishwife, a villager, a greengrocer. That's because they are cultured and it shows in their ability to argue. But beyond that, what they have not understood is that I have always been, am, and will always be, proud to be a person of the people."

This narrative has three aspects. One is of American inspiration: the myth of the "selfmade man", in this case a woman, who in a world of schools and academies, bound by hostile circumstances, carves a road to success for herself. In the process, to paraphrase Frederick Douglass, she becomes the architect of her own fortunes. A second aspect is typical of European right-wing populism: the leader who becomes

the interpreter of “the people” and their wishes. Meloni shares this narrative with Marine Le Pen. Then there is the third aspect: the revenge of a post-fascist far right that believes it has unfairly endured a *cordon sanitaire* and now, at last from a position of power, can occupy the institutions. This mission of revenge explains why the premier, despite now being at the apex of power, continues to say – as she did at the Fratelli d’Italia convention in Pescara in April – that “they have always tried to shut us up, to prevent us from expressing our ideas and programmes. They tell lies about us.”

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In this victim narrative, any expression of dissent is attributed to a single enemy: the Left. Meloni seems to be adhering to the “Finkelstein formula”. After losing power in 2002, Viktor Orbán turned to the Republican strategist Arthur Jay Finkelstein, a former advisor to Ronald Reagan and Benjamin Netanyahu. Beginning in 2008, together with his dauphin George Birnbaum, Finkelstein shaped Orbán’s campaigns, which brought him back to power in 2010. The essence of the approach remains unchanged: the construction of the enemy. The Finkelstein formula is, in short, a negative strategy based not on pros but on cons.

Meloni attacks newspapers, journalists, writers, intellectuals, and museum directors. She does so constantly, directly, and increasingly aggressively. And the occupation of cultural institutions continues. For instance, although Christian Greco has achieved excellent results as director of the Egyptian Museum in Turin, the Meloni government has long lobbied for him to leave the job. One of Greco’s “sins”: an initiative to offer discounted tickets to Arabic speakers.

A favourite target of Meloni has long been Roberto Saviano. The writer is known the world over for his books – most notably *Gomorrah* – that tackle organised crime, for which he lives under constant threat from the Camorra mafia. Despite Meloni’s many public verbal attacks on Saviano, the prime minister pursued him in court for defamation after he called her a “bastard”. A year ago, the writer had to pay a 1000 euro fine. “I considered this trial intimidation,” said Saviano. In 2023 his TV show was cancelled from RAI’s programming. Then, in 2024, Saviano was excluded from the Italian programme of the Frankfurt Book Fair. German publishing houses rushed to invite him instead. The government-appointed official managing Italy’s participation at the fair, Mauro Mazza, explained: “Saviano isn’t in the programme and hasn’t been invited, to give a voice to those who haven’t had one so far.” The statement clearly shows how the myth of the underdog is used to silence critical voices.

## **Press freedom under pressure**

Saviano is not the only intellectual to have been sued by the prime minister. Other targets of her attacks include journalists and newspapers. The daily newspaper *Domani*<sup>1</sup> has been on the receiving end of lawsuits filed by ministers, undersecretaries, and the premier’s chief of staff, and is threatened with more. A lawsuit filed by Meloni herself was recently withdrawn after the European Commission flagged up the problem of pluralism in Italy. *Domani* continues to be the butt of verbal attacks by Meloni and members of her government.

Following an urgent inquiry into Italy’s public service media in May 2024, the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) issued its report, *Silencing the Fourth Estate: Italy’s democratic drift*. In reflections on the daily, it notes: “Domani has faced attacks of various kinds, ranging from threats and lawsuits to

verbal attacks and alleged attempts to undermine the confidentiality of journalistic sources. In most cases, these episodes were triggered by politicians and public officials.” No member of the governing coalition wanted to meet with MFRR.<sup>2</sup> However, when its report was published, far-right media outlets were quick to publicise the names of the individuals consulted as witnesses, branding them “anti-Meloni journalists”.

MFRR’s report observes, more generally: “Since the Meloni-led government took office, media freedom in Italy has come under increasing pressure, with unprecedented attacks and violations of press freedom often undertaken by politicians in an attempt to marginalise and silence critical voices.” It notes “a surge in the number of alerts” about cases of infringed press freedom: 193 from October 2022 to June 2024, compared with 75 in the previous 22 months. The frequency of alerts has almost tripled since Meloni has been in government. Their source is also alarming: “As many as 54 of the 193 alerts were triggered by government or public authority initiatives,” states the report.

The Meloni government’s assaults on media freedom have now been documented by multiple organisations, including the European Federation of Journalists and authoritative press freedom watchdogs. The trend is clear: Reporters without Borders’ 2024 World Press Freedom Index observes that Italy has dropped five places compared to the previous year. It now sits in the “problematic zone” alongside Poland, Hungary, Greece, and Bulgaria.

In June, the Media Pluralism Monitor, a benchmark for the European Commission’s annual Rule of Law Report, attested to worrying patterns in Italy on several fronts, from government SLAPPs (strategic lawsuits against public participation) to the colonisation of public service. In the section on media freedom, Italy moved from “low” to “medium” risk. The prime minister’s response to the Commission’s report published in July was to attack the newspapers she considered enemies.

In this regard, Meloni’s behaviour was predictable. She is intolerant of questions and criticism: after directly attacking journalists and newspapers, she presents her targets as aggressors, as enemies of the nation or malevolent agents of a political cause. Public service journalists are also subjected to this delegitimisation. The prime minister disparaged RAI journalists reporting on Albania, which is governed by ally Edi Rama, as malevolent political agents. She was at Rama’s side when he attacked Italian journalists at a press conference.

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## **God, fatherland, family, and business**

What model of culture underpins this attempt to silence dissent? A surface examination reveals the usual preoccupations with identity, the cult of the leader, birth rate, the traditional Christian family, undermining LGBTQI+ rights – all peppered with a few popular culture references. The premier’s passion for J.R.R. Tolkien is so well known, for example, that on a visit to Poland, Mateusz Morawiecki, who was then prime minister, took her to a *Lord of the Rings*-themed café in Warsaw. Sangiuliano devised and inaugurated an exhibition on Tolkien at the beginning of his tenure as culture minister. And then there was Meloni’s remark to the audience of the Atlantic Council during an award ceremony this autumn: “My English teacher was Michael Jackson.”

But look deeper and the Melonian vision of culture comes across as little more than a reactionary form of neoliberalism. This can be seen in how Meloni dismisses environmentalist questions. The prime minister knows that the issue cannot be dodged, so she uses the banner of “conservative environmentalism” to steal turf from the Left. Her party has attacked Greta Thunberg’s Fridays for Future and environmentalism in general, contrasting them with “ecologism” as defence of territory.

One particularly influential figure for Meloni is British conservative philosopher Roger Scruton, whom she quoted in her inauguration speech. The Melonian ideological paraphernalia is that of yesteryear: God, fatherland, and family. The environment means “creation” and ecology means defence of the homeland. Yet the positions taken by Fratelli d’Italia in Brussels show that the party is less concerned with climate than it is with defending the fossil fuel industry and big corporations. Behind the Scrutonian voluntarism and localism lurks the idea that no initiative from above should put a brake on the predatory activities of man and the market. It begins with the defence of hunting, and ends with the elimination of all restraints and taxes on polluting businesses. This is what Meloni means when she says “we want to defend nature but with man in it”: God, fatherland, family, but, above all, business first.

*Translated by [Voxeurop](#).*

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Published December 5, 2024

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/a-single-narrative-culture-and-media-under-giorgia-meloni/>

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