

## **Polluting Education: Eni's Greenwashing in Italian Schools and Universities**

**Article by Anna Toniolo**

February 16, 2024

The influence of energy giant Eni on Italian politics and culture has continued even after privatisation began in the 1990s. Today, the company has a pervasive presence in the country's chronically underfunded education system, framing the debate on the green transition and potentially undermining the independence of research.

Last December's COP28 in Dubai concluded with a historic commitment to "transition away" from fossil fuels. And yet, no precise obligations or deadlines were outlined for states to meet this target. When it comes to the climate, vague promises and insufficient action reflect the approach of many national governments, including that of Italy. Officially, the country's right-wing executive, in office since 2022, recognises the need to combat climate change. This is reflected, for example, in the National Integrated Energy and Climate Plan (PNIEC), which sets Italy's energy and emission reduction targets. However, various environmental associations consider the plan still too closely linked to natural gas, a fossil fuel. Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's flagship, the so-called "Mattei Plan for Development in States on the African Continent", which aims to transform Italy into a European gas hub, goes in the same direction.

The plan is named after Enrico Mattei, politician and founder of the Italian energy giant Eni (National Hydrocarbons Authority). Today, Eni, one third of which is still owned by the Italian state, is the nineteenth largest oil and gas producer globally. The multinational corporation's influence on Italian politics is not limited to its founder's popularity with the government, helping in part to explain the national inertia in implementing the green transition.

A report, published in November 2023 by the NGOs Greenpeace Italia and ReCommon, highlights how the energy giant has a significant presence in the world of public education, through which it can potentially pollute the debate and undermine the independence of scientific research.

### **Foreign policy and culture**

Founded in 1953, Eni operates in 62 countries and employs around 32,000 workers. The "six-legged dog" – recognised via its iconic logo – is active in oil, natural gas, chemicals and biochemicals, and the production and marketing of electricity from fossil fuels and renewable sources. In the 2023 Fortune Global 500 ranking, Eni is among the world's top 100 companies by revenue. In 2022, the company's profits exceeded the GDP of countries such as Mozambique, Montenegro, Togo, and the Maldives.

*A cable from the US embassy in Rome described Eni's vision for European energy as "disturbingly similar to that of Gazprom and the Kremlin".*

The multinational is also among the biggest polluters in the world: in 2021 alone, ENI's global operations

“emitted 456 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>, while the Italian energy system as a whole emitted just under 400 million,” says Antonio Tricarico, programme director at ReCommon. On its website, Eni claims to emit just over 20 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>, but the calculation does not take into account indirect emissions related to its activities.

Eni’s influence on Italian politics and society is a longstanding phenomenon. Already in the 1950s, when it was a public body, the company pursued an autonomous foreign policy capable of influencing politics: Enrico Mattei played a key role in supporting the economic and political aspirations of Arab countries and Iran with the aim of weakening America’s domination over the international oil market.

Even after privatisation in the 1990s, Eni’s involvement in politics remained intact. Documents released by WikiLeaks, for example, suggest that Silvio Berlusconi may have profited from Eni’s energy deals with Russia’s Gazprom. A cable from the US embassy in Rome described Eni’s vision for European energy as “disturbingly similar to that of Gazprom and the Kremlin”.

More recently, ReCommon revealed the existence of a protocol that allowed the oil giant to station its people at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for an unlimited period. Their purpose was to “facilitate a ‘connection’ between Italian diplomatic action and the interests of the company”.

Eni is also present in many sectors of the economy, society, and culture. Several national newspapers feature publicity or content sponsored by Eni, in which the multinational company presents itself as a pioneer of environmental sustainability. The presence of the six-legged dog in Italian media goes in the opposite direction to initiatives such as those of *The Guardian*, the American publishing group *Vox Media*, and Swedish newspapers *Dagens ETC* and *Dagens Nyheter*, which have banned fossil industry advertisements.

Eni has also financed cultural events such as the May Day concert in Rome and the Sanremo song contest, as well as museums, exhibitions, and festivals. Starting next season, Eni will also be the title sponsor of Serie A, Italy’s top football league. Finally, as revealed by Greenpeace Italia and ReCommon, the multinational company is also active in schools and universities, where it trains teachers on issues concerning environmental sustainability, finances degree courses, PhDs, and more.

*Several national newspapers feature publicity or content sponsored by Eni, in which the multinational company presents itself as a pioneer of environmental sustainability.*

Andrea Turco, a journalist and contributor to the Italian environmental organisation A Sud, explains that, on the one hand, Eni finances organisations and events because “it knows it has a negative [public] perception ... and has to make up for it in some way”. On the other hand, according to Turco, “especially among the old managers, there is still an attachment to the Mattei model and the belief that Eni is a social enterprise”. This vision, the journalist explains, leads the company to invest part of its huge budget in activities not directly related to the energy sector.

Although it benefits Eni’s reputation, this activism raises questions of democracy at a decisive moment for climate action – especially since Eni continues to invest heavily in fossil fuels.

## **Energy (non)transition**

The multinational company has recently declared its ambition to decarbonise and move towards clean and sustainable energies through various projects and funding. However, it continues to prioritise investments in oil.

In 2022 Eni made record profits of EUR 20.4 billion, more than double the figure for 2021. This growth in profits is mainly due to price spikes in fossil fuels, from which most of the company's profits derive. Eni's technical investments are still focused on fossil fuels. In 2022 the multinational invested 15 times more in fossil fuels than in Eni Plenitude, focused on renewable energy.

Eni plans to increase oil and gas extraction by 3-4 per cent per year until 2026, contrary to the decarbonisation strategy called for by, among others, the IPCC, which demands immediate and rapid action to phase out fossil fuels to keep global warming within 1.5 C.

In 2023, Eni signed a long-term contract with QatarEnergy LNG NFE for the supply of up to 1.5 billion cubic metres of liquefied natural gas (LNG) per year, adding to the 2.9 billion cubic metres that Eni has been importing from Qatar since 2007. The LNG will be delivered to the Piombino regasification plant off the coast of Tuscany, starting in 2026 and continuing for the next 27 years, despite The European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change, the UN, and IPCC calling for zero emissions as close as possible to 2040 for Western countries. In 2023 Eni also acquired Neptune Energy, a London-based company that produces oil and gas from fields in eight countries, including the UK, Norway, Germany, Algeria, the Netherlands, and Indonesia, for 4.9 billion dollars.

According to UN experts, no company or government can be said to be environmentally sustainable if it continues to exploit fossil fuels, contribute to deforestation, or persist in other environmentally destructive activities; Eni's efforts to present itself as "green" are a classic example of greenwashing. In 2020, Eni was fined by the independent Italian competition authority AGCM for using misleading advertising in its promotional campaign for Eni Diesel+ fuel, which was presented as sustainable and capable of reducing gas consumption.

## **Eni guides education**

Given its poor environmental track record, Eni's extensive presence in education is worrying. In November 2023 the international student network End Fossil occupied La Sapienza in Rome and the University of Pisa, followed by the universities of Turin, Parma, and Milan, in protest against agreements between universities and fossil fuel multinationals.

According to the Greenpeace and ReCommon report, more than one in two Italian universities declare some relationship with Eni. However, 75 per cent of universities that report having agreements with the company, or receiving funding, denied environmentalists any chance to scrutinise the terms of their agreements. According to Eni, around 100 projects with Italian universities, worth around 10 million euros, were active in 2022.

The company's presence within universities is not just about funding. Through partnerships and framework agreements, involving seminars, teaching projects, and career guidance, the six-legged dog infiltrates universities, handling topics related to energy transition and sustainability, gaining access to research and a specialised workforce. The risk here is that the university stops being a place for education and the development of critical knowledge, becoming a recruitment pool for big business

instead – and a tool for greenwashing.

*Eni also directly engages with students by funding guided tours, internships, and, most critically, offering partnerships for career orientation programmes.*

Student organisations agree with concerns about Eni’s presence in universities. According to a member of Link Bologna, the company’s presence “means that teaching, and consequently research, are no longer free”. In fact, the multinational company also finances master’s and degree courses, and collaborates with Italian universities on energy-related degree programmes. Figures linked to Eni also have seats in the steering committees of some degree courses. These committees are intended to guide, monitor and evaluate the education system, and identify professional pathways.

The multinational also recruits workers directly in universities by participating, for example, in career days and orientation events. As Emanuele Genovese, a member of Fridays For Future Italia and End Fossil Roma, explained to Greenpeace Italia and ReCommon, on such occasions Eni presents its “sustainability line, without any critical filtering on the part of the universities”.

The presence of Eni in the education sector is not limited to universities. Through various programmes, Eni was present in 90 per cent of Italian high schools in 2023, involving approximately 130,000 classes and 3 million pupils. According to Greenpeace and ReCommon, Eni’s reach is facilitated by continuous cuts in state resources allocated to education, forcing schools to seek funding from private entities. Specifically, Eni contributes to the training of teachers, especially on topics related to the environment, the climate crisis, and sustainability. Since 2020, the company has organised a series of seminars for high school teachers titled “The Future Doesn’t Wait”. During discussions on climate change, Eni makes no mention of its own responsibility, or that of the fossil fuel industry in general.

Eni also directly engages with students by funding guided tours, internships, and, most critically, offering partnerships for career orientation programmes. According to Greenpeace Italia and ReCommon, Eni’s contributions are aimed not only at improving its image by appearing attentive to the needs of students but also at training and recruiting a workforce for itself and its business.

An increasing number of universities in countries like the UK are severing ties with the fossil fuel industry – which remains extremely powerful nonetheless – in response to student-led campaigns. Meanwhile, Italian universities continue to refuse access to their agreements with Eni. For its part, Eni seems to have no intention of withdrawing from the education sector.

**Note:** In the capacity of freelance journalist, the author participated in drafting the Greenpeace and ReCommon report.

Translated by Ciaran Lawless | Voxeurop

---



Anna Toniolo is an Italian freelance journalist based in Venice who writes on gender, work, migration, and extremism. She also works for *Facta News*, a fact-checking project that deals with misinformation, and is a member of the International Fact-Checking Network.

Published February 16, 2024

Article in English

Translation available in Italian

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/polluting-education-enis-greenwashing-in-italian-schools-and-universities/>

*The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space.*

*Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.*