

## **The Climate Won't Wait for Italian Politics**

**Article by Stefano Liberti**

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After two years of technical government, Mario Draghi's awkward cross-party alliance fell apart this July, triggering new elections. So far, political and media attention has focused squarely on alliances and jockeying for positions. Meanwhile, Italy is going through one of the harshest summers on record as crops wilt, rivers dry up, and flash floods follow drought. Journalist Stefano Liberti on the failure of Italy's political class to see the climate crisis before their eyes.

The Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi resigned on 21 July 2022, prompting the President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella to dissolve Parliament and call an early election to be held on 25 September.

It is the first time since 1919 that there has been a summer election campaign in Italy. In the brief time available, the parties are busy creating alliances and defining programmes. However, the one subject entirely absent from the electoral campaign is the climate crisis. Its absence is even more surprising considering the profound effects of global warming that Italy is already going through.

For several months, the Po Basin has been gripped in an unprecedented drought. The complete absence of snow in the Alps last winter and no rain for the last six months has transformed the largest Italian river into a small stream. In some areas, you can walk on large sandy beaches that have emerged from the riverbeds.

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The lack of water could have catastrophic effects. The Po Basin is home to a third of the Italian population lives, generates 40 per cent of Italian gross domestic product, 35 per cent of agricultural production, and 55 per cent of its hydroelectricity. More than one hundred communes in Piedmont and Lombardy have begun to ration water for civilian use. Its use for irrigation is limited in several areas and hydroelectricity energy production has been interrupted. According to estimates by Coldiretti, the main Italian agricultural confederation, a third of the national production in maize, soya, wheat, rice, and fruit has already been lost. In the Po Delta, where the Po flows out into the sea, the minimal flow of the river has resulted in a sharp increase in the so-called "salt wedge", that is to say, sea water at the mouth of the river. The increase compromises the availability of fresh water for irrigation and puts supplies of drinking water at risk in the area.

The drought in the Po Basin is not the only palpable manifestation of the effects of the climate crisis in Italy. On 3 July, an enormous serac broke off the Marmolada glacier killing 11 hikers. The clearly higher average seasonal temperatures are causing glaciers throughout the Alps to melt and hiking has been banned from several areas.

Downstream, the Mediterranean Sea has recorded extremely high temperatures. According to ENEA, the Italian Agency for New Technologies, Energy, and Sustainable Economic Development, the water is between 4 to 5 degrees above the seasonal average. This spike substantially changes marine ecosystems. Invasive alien species appear and find habitats well suited to their survival, while native species disappear.

### **An inept political class**

These facts are not subject to public debate, nor are they analysed in the programmes of the political parties standing for elections. The climate impacts recorded this year are still generally considered to be an anomaly. As the Minister of Ecological Transition in Draghi's cabinet, Roberto Cingolani, said, "We hope that the drought is a one-off occurrence". The statement by the minister who should have been guiding the ecological transition is a clear example of the Italian political class inability to confront a crisis even as it hits the country so significantly.

This year is not an anomaly but a confirmation of a trend. Italy is the hub of what the scientists call a "climate hot spot", an area of the planet where the effects of global heating are more obvious than elsewhere. The geographic position of the country, in the centre of the Mediterranean, particularly exposes Italy to rising sea levels and increasingly frequent extreme weather events.

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There were 2061 of these last year in Italy according to the European Severe Weather Database that monitors Europe every day. This means that on average, in five or six areas of the country, winds with a speed of over 80 kilometres an hour, flooding, or hailstorms with hail over two centimetres in diameter were recorded every day. These increasingly common extreme events cause material damage and victims, exposing the fragility of a country whose territory underwent intense urbanisation and overdevelopment during the last 60 years.

Land consumption in Italy is clearly above the European average. According to data recently published by Ispra, the Italian Institute for Environmental Protection and Research, in 2021 more than 2 metres squared were lost per second, the highest rate in the last 10 years. When land is consumed, ecosystem services are lost and territories become less able to absorb specific climatic shocks such as extreme events and heatwaves. According to Ispra, the damage caused by land consumption in the last 10 years is between 81 and 99

billion euros.

It is precisely this inability to understand the extent of the climate crisis that makes it difficult to put prevention policies in place. While Italy is one of the European countries most affected by global heating, it is one of the few that has failed to develop a serious adaptation policy.

The national climate change adaptation plan (PNACC), a document written by a group of experts in 2017, has been gathering dust in the ministerial archives for five years. The government has yet to produce an environmental evaluation. Evidently, the government does not consider it as a priority.

## **Draghi's failures**

Upon taking office, now-departed Prime Minister Draghi had announced incisive action to combat the climate crisis. "The warming of the planet has direct effects on our lives and on our health due to pollution, hydrogeological fragility, and rising sea levels which could make many areas of some coastal cities uninhabitable" said Mario Draghi in his inaugural speech on 17 February 2021. Immediately afterwards he announced policies to help companies become more sustainable. He then created, for the first time in Italy, the Ministry of Ecological Transition to guide the green conversion of the production, transport, and energy supply systems.

One and a half years later, the government's performance in this aspect is disappointing. Not only has the adaptation plan not been approved, but all the policies for reducing greenhouse gas emissions have been weakened. The invasion of Ukraine by Russia exposed Italy's dependence on Moscow for 40 per cent of its gas imports. This dependence should have stimulated a change in the country's energy model. Instead of accelerating the transition to renewable, the Draghi government frenetically searched for new gas suppliers such as Algeria, Angola, Mozambique, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The contracts concluded, as well as investments in gas transport and regasification infrastructure, demonstrate the will to remain anchored to a system built on the combustion of fossil fuels.

As for the enormous amount of resources allocated to Italy by Next Generation EU, the EU post-pandemic recovery fund, the money will only partially go to combatting the climate crisis. Only 13 per cent of the 234.8 billion euros earmarked for Italy are allocated for specifically "green" actions according to an analysis by Green Recovery Tracker, well below the 37 per cent threshold established by Europe.

The election campaign that has just begun does not seem likely to break with this trend of minimising the problem. How best to combat the climate crisis through both mitigation and adaptation policies is absent from the political debate. This is not surprising for parties of the centre-right coalition, the favourites in the polls. They have always tended to ignore the severity of the emergency, at times openly denying climate change. However, even the centre-left currently limits itself to vague proclamations about the need to address the environmental crisis without offering any more detail.

While politics ignores the problem, there are many voices in civil society who want swift action now. Significant from this point of view is the open letter that a group of scientists

and climatologists have recently written to the political class.

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“Climate science has shown us for some time that Italy, inserted in the context of a climate change hot spot like the Mediterranean, is more affected than other areas of the world by the recent anthropic climate change and its effects,” starts the letter, published on 3 August and also signed by the winner of the Nobel Prize for Physics Giorgio Parisi. “So we hope for the development of political programmes on these subjects and prompt action by the next government to combat the climate crisis and its impacts.”

If scientists have felt it necessary to go against their usual reluctance and make this public appeal, it means that they consider continued political inaction to be a serious problem. For the moment, the call to action has not had much effect but it is also true that the electoral campaign has just begun.

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Stefano Liberti is an Italian journalist. He has written *I signori del cibo. Viaggio nell'industria alimentare che sta distruggendo il pianeta* (Minimum fax 2016). He has filmed *Mare chiuso* (2012) with Andrea Segre.

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