

## **Young Activism, Old Politics: Italy's Divided Climate Movement**

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On one side, a political party looking for a people. On the other, a people struggling to find a political outlet. In between, an unfolding climate crisis that demands an immediate response from the institutions. In recent months, two very different organisations have managed to pierce the veil of silence that usually surrounds the issue of climate change in Italy.

Europa Verde (EV), the Italian Green party, managed to enter parliament following the September 2022 elections. However, this was only a partial victory for the environmentalist cause. The 3.5 per cent the party obtained at the polls sits in stark contrast to the enthusiasm shown by young people towards climate activism, which brought 80,000 people onto the streets on the eve of the elections.

Ultima Generazione, a transnational activist group known for its non-violent civil disobedience actions aimed at drawing attention to the climate crisis and government inaction, has also managed to make the headlines. At the turn of 2023, the eco-activists sparked debate by spray-painting works of art and symbolic public places, such as The Sower by Vincent Van Gogh, the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, and the façade of the Italian Senate in Rome. Although these initiatives did not cause permanent damage, they roused the ire of the newly elected far-right government led by Giorgia Meloni. A “law against eco-vandals” was introduced in mid-April to severely punish damage to cultural heritage.

While the Italian parliamentary opposition, including Europa Verde, condemned this criminalisation of climate dissent, EV refused to endorse the activists' actions. The Italian Green party and Ultima Generazione share similar goals when it comes to tackling climate change, but they differ significantly in their strategies to achieve them. This apparently unbridgeable gap runs along the generational axis and threatens to condemn the Italian climate movement to political irrelevance.

### **The roots of the division**

This difference of views has historical and structural roots that make it difficult for parliamentary environmentalism and the climate activists to join forces. Fragmentation on the theme of environmentalism is part of the history of the Green movement and its evolution within Italian politics. As Paolo Gerbaudo, sociologist and political theorist at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa and King's College London, explains, “The Italian Green movement as a party dates back to the early 1990s and has had a very troubled history.” Although the Italian Green party was effectively born in 1990, it had already made it into parliament three years earlier, as an evolution of various ecological movements dedicated to individual causes. Between the 1990s and early 2000s, the Greens achieved concrete political results such as the approval of a law on protected areas, which still safeguards Italy's natural heritage today. In the following years, internal divisions progressively alienated the party's voters; in 2008, not a single Green representative was elected. For the Greens to reorganise as Europa Verde and make it back to parliament, it took a 14-year-long “journey through the desert”, as party co-spokesperson Angelo Bonelli puts it. Together with the Italian Left, Europa Verde won 3.5 per cent of the votes in the general election held on 25 September last year.

A major obstacle to the Italian Greens gaining wider support is their limited appeal to the less wealthy segments of the population. The party, historically associated with the radical upper middle class and represented almost exclusively in larger cities, has failed to convincingly combine its climate discourse with social issues and inequalities. Another problem of Italian environmentalism, according to Gerbaudo, is that it was institutionalised very quickly, rapidly passing from a protest movement to being part of the system of power. “This trend somehow dried up the aspect of protest and dissent,” he emphasises.

In recent years, this void seems to have been filled by a new wave of environmental activism that has attracted the attention of a different demographic in particular: the younger generation. Young activists are putting pressure on the government and public opinion, underlining the urgency of more decisive action to curb climate change. Fridays For Future, Ultima Generazione, and Extinction Rebellion have reintroduced an element of protest, which they deem necessary in the face of the climate crisis. While they employ different methods, these movements share the common objective of raising public awareness and urging the government and the political class to act immediately to stop the unfolding environmental disaster.

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The origins of these movements make them structurally different from parliamentary environmentalism. All three were born in the wake of international youth mobilisation against government passivity. Their approach is decidedly more radical, which places the Greens in an uncomfortable position and hinders attempts to create a common front.

### **So similar, yet so different**

“We absolutely disagree with the actions of Ultima Generazione,” explains [Angelo Bonelli](#). The EV co-spokesperson, a long-standing member of the Italian environmentalist movement, was recently elected to parliament for the second time. According to Bonelli, the activists’ strategy lacks vision and may prove counterproductive for the climate movement.

In 2022, Bonelli met a delegation from Ultima Generazione. He says he is not, in principle, opposed to radical protest. In the early 1990s, he recalls, he filled the fuel tanks of bulldozers with sugar to sabotage the uncontrolled development of a green area of Rome. The problem, Bonelli claims, is rather one of communication. “We only talk about spray paint, never about solutions or proposals to combat climate change,” he explains, “not to mention the effects that these protests have on public opinion.”

Bonelli is particularly critical of Ultima Generazione’s roadblocks – acts of civil disobedience that can paralyse cities’ main traffic arteries for hours. In his view, the ecological transition must be socially desirable, whereas the activists’ demonstrations alienate people from the climate cause.

Delfina, a spokesperson for Ultima Generazione, sees things differently. “Environmental movements have existed since the 1970s, and yet here we are in the middle of a dramatic situation. This means that the more traditional practices have not worked,” she told the *Green European Journal*. According to climate activists, the climate emergency demands a more radical approach than institutional policy allows. “Unlike politicians, we are not looking for approval,” says Delfina. “Shocking people is part of the

process; when they talk about us, they inevitably talk about the reasons why we're doing what we're doing."

*This alliance between climate protest and workers may have paved the way for future mass mobilisations.*

In Ultima Generazione's view, its methods are similar to those of women's rights activists, and civil disobedience remains the most effective weapon against inequalities and the indifference of institutions. But will it ever be possible to create a common front of Italian environmentalism? Ultima Generazione is open to dialogue, as long as the principle that different organisations play different roles is respected, Delfina claims. "If we expect to enter politics, it would mean accepting a slow process, and we cannot afford to wait."

### **The third way: Fridays For Future**

What all this boils down to is the ability to influence public debate and policy-making. Bonelli is aware of this, as are the representatives of Ultima Generazione, who put themselves on the line every day to protest against the government's energy policies.

Yet so far, the efforts of the broader climate movement have had little effect. Since taking office, the current right-wing coalition has been insensitive to the demands of the Greens and climate activists, who are often referred to in government discourse as representatives of an "ideological environmentalism" or even "the green Taliban". One of the first formal acts of Prime Minister Meloni was to separate environment and energy policy by eliminating the Ministry for Ecological Transition, the creation of which was one of the most significant victories for Italian environmentalism of the last decade. The government has also tried to block an EU-wide ban on internal combustion engines, activate new gas drilling lines in the Adriatic Sea, and stimulate the production of biofuels in Kenya, Congo, Angola, Côte d'Ivoire, Mozambique, and Rwanda, a move Bonelli criticises as "neo-colonialist".

In short, the divided Italian climate movement is losing the battle. The only glimmer of hope comes from Fridays For Future, a movement that has proven capable of mass mobilisation.

Like Ultima Generazione, the movement founded by Greta Thunberg refuses to channel protest via an institutional path, but shares the Greens' critique of radical eco-activism. Fridays For Future has opted for the "third way", which consists in embracing the intersectional struggle and sharing the demands of feminist, anti-racist, and queer movements. In October 2022, this "alliance of the oppressed" resulted in the "Convergere per insorgere" (Meet to Rise Up) march in Bologna. On that occasion, tens of thousands of people took to the streets side by side with the protagonists of the longest factory occupation in Italian history – former employees of automotive giant GKN who were laid off from the company's Tuscan factory in 2021. This alliance between climate protesters and workers may have paved the way for future climate-related mass mobilisations that could change the face of Italian progressivism.

By allowing different voices to coexist, Fridays For Future also tries to overcome the generational divide. "The experience with GKN has helped us to get closer to a different generation from the one that takes to the streets for the global climate strikes," said Fridays For Future spokesperson Marta Maroglio. "It was a dialogue that opened our eyes on the connections that exist between the climate crisis and the world of work. The ecological transition cannot become an excuse for firing workers."

## **Italian anomaly?**

Despite Fridays For Future's attempt to create a united front, the fragmentation of the climate movement is often portrayed in Italian public debate as the inevitable result of incompatible generational sensibilities. But it doesn't have to be this way.

In France, for example, Europe Écologie Les Verts is traditionally regarded as an anti-system force capable of combining climate demands with an anti-capitalist consciousness. This has allowed the party to structure itself as a leftist movement, forming a coalition with Jean-Luc Mélenchon's radical left ahead of the 2022 parliamentary elections. This leftist tradition has enabled the French Greens to present themselves as a credible interlocutor for eco-activist movements, as evidenced by the decision of Green national secretary Marine Tondelier to support the actions of Dernière Rénovation (the French branch of Last Generation) and to participate in climate strikes called by Fridays For Future. This alliance of climate movements was particularly evident in protests against the construction of méga-bassines – immense artificial water reservoirs for farmers – in western France.

Since her election as Green national secretary at the end of 2022, Tondelier has tried to link the climate movement with transfeminist struggles and the social discontent over President Emmanuel Macron's pension reforms. This choice brings the Greens closer to activism – the milieu in which Tondelier cut her political teeth – and further from traditional political parties.

On the other hand, the most successful Green party in Europe electorally, the German Greens, have gone further than their Italian counterparts in drawing a line between themselves and climate activists.

The German Green party, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, is more centrist than its French equivalent on issues of civil rights and inclusion, and has a well-established base among young and urban voters. In September 2021, the German Greens came third in the federal elections with nearly 15 per cent of the vote, securing 118 seats in parliament and a role within the governing coalition together with the Social Democrats and the Liberals.

But things have not been easy for the Greens in government. Conflicts over environmental issues have seen the party's popularity decline and the coalition's stability threatened. In the western German hamlet of Lützerath, which has since been destroyed to make way for the Garzweiler coalmine, the party found itself at odds with climate activists who opposed the mine's expansion. And in a recent statement, the party's chief whip Irene Mihalic condemned the civil disobedience initiatives carried out by Letzte Generation (the German branch of Last Generation), calling them an "elitist and hypocritical protest" that "achieves the opposite of what we need in the current situation".

## **A future to organise**

The fragmentation within the Italian environmental front is effectively thwarting its efforts. Bringing ecology into the Italian national political framework would require a common commitment to a single objective: the approval of policies aimed at environmental sustainability, the energy transition, and climate protection. The transformation of civil society mobilisation into concrete political consequences also requires a certain unity.

Structural contradictions within Italian public debate are reinforcing the impasse. According to data collected by the Pavia Observatory for Greenpeace Italy, in the first four months of 2022, only 0.7 per cent of the stories featured on the main evening news programmes were related to the climate crisis. In

the second four months, partly thanks to the debate sparked by the actions of Ultima Generazione, climate coverage increased to 2.5 per cent of all stories. With 84 per cent of Italians considering climate change to be a very serious problem according to Eurobarometer data published in 2021, this is clearly insufficient. But if the Italian population is so concerned about climate change, why did Europa Verde get only 3.5 per cent of the vote in the September 2022 elections? The problem could lie in the methods used by the party to mobilise the public and, above all, the political response to the issue. According to Gerbaudo, in the current Italian context it is “necessary to remind people that climate policy is a policy of common sense, and common sense dictates that intervention on this issue needs to speed up”.

Without a stronger Green party, however, it will be difficult to capitalise on the growth in interest and activism on climate issues at the polls. Europa Verde is the result of splits and convergences, with a leadership that many consider outdated. The climate movement currently finds itself halfway between a new phase of institutionalisation – which has proved fatal in the past – and a new organisational opportunity as modelled by Fridays For Future. It must use this occasion to develop an approach that, in contrast to existing institutional structures, offers a democratic space for participation that can embrace intersectional struggles, overcome class and generational divides, and thus achieve real political and social change.

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