

Climate Obstruction in Italy

From Outright Denial to Widespread Climate Delay

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INTRODUCTION: A HOTSPOT FOR CLIMATE CHANGE BUT LITTLE ACTION

Italy is a hotspot for climate change due to its combination of multiple major risk factors and high vulnerability.¹ According to the European Severe Weather Database, the country experienced 3,191 extreme weather events in 2022, compared with 2,072 the year before, and 380 in 2010. Because Italy is particularly exposed to climate impacts, it should follow that the country would have very ambitious mitigation objectives and work hard to adapt to these inevitable impacts. However, Italy's political and institutional commitment to decarbonization and the energy transition has been weak. For example, Italy approved the 2018 National Adaptation Plan (Piano Nazionale di Adattamento al Cambiamento Climatico, or PNACC) in December 2023, and its already tepid transition seems to have been further diluted by the right-wing coalition currently leading the country. No long-term strategy has been submitted to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the country lacks a national, economy-wide emissions reduction target. Figure 11.1 includes the absolute values and percent change of Italian greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 to 2021.

Italy Greenhouse Gas Emissions

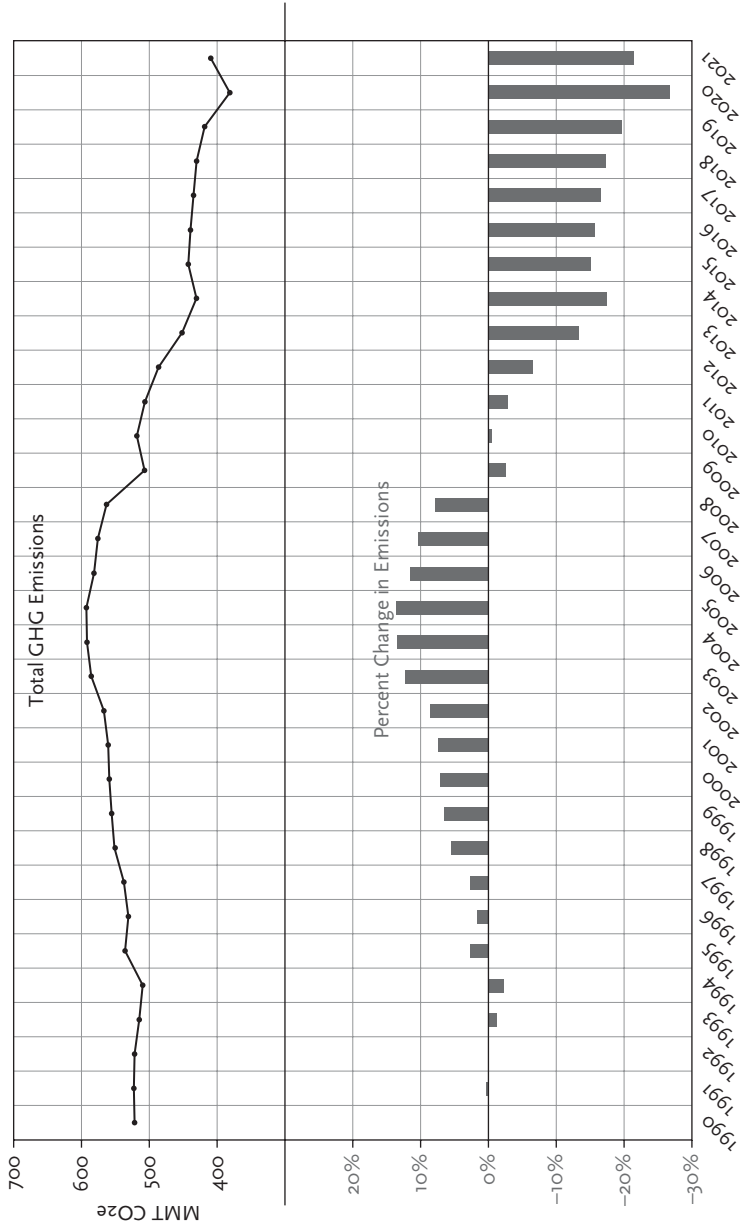


Figure 11.1 Total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (in MMT CO₂e) and percentage change in emissions in Italy between 1990 and 2021, inclusive.

Source: Total GHG emissions based on data provided by Güttschow and Pflüger (2023) for Kyoto Six Greenhouse Gas Totals.

As Figure 11.1 shows, Italy's total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (excluding LULUCF) in 1990 amounted to 522 million metric tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents (MMT CO₂e) (for comparison, the European Union [EU27]'s combined emissions were 4,860 MMT CO₂e) and by 2021 had decreased to 410 MMT CO₂e (EU27's total emissions were 3,460 MMT CO₂e in the same year).²

On 18 December 2020, Italy submitted its first nationally determined contribution (NDC) jointly with the other twenty-six EU member countries, committing to the binding target of a net domestic reduction of at least 55% in GHGs by 2030 compared with 1990. In March 2022, Italy adopted its Plan for the Ecological Transition (Piano per la Transizione Ecologica, or PTE), developed under the country's Next Generation EU National Recovery and Resilience Plan. The plan included a non-binding emissions reduction goal of 51% compared with 1990 levels by 2030. However, according to the draft of the 2023 National Integrated Plan for Energy and Climate (Piano Nazionale Integrato per l'Energia e il Clima, or PNIEC, which should be approved and adopted before June 2024), Italy set a GHG emissions reduction target of 43.7% compared with 2005 levels by 2030 and also pledged to phase out coal by 2025. This goal, however, is far from the estimated 61–71% in reductions by 2030 compared with 1990 levels that would be required to align with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)'s 1.5°C warming pathway. To meet it, the country would need to almost double its emissions reduction target.³

This inadequate decarbonization plan occurs in the context of Italy's peculiar history of climate obstruction since the 1990s. This chapter analyses the efforts to obstruct climate action in Italy and demonstrates that they have been successful in denying the urgency of the climate crisis, creating confusion, promoting disinformation, and delaying political and institutional action.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

As a country that lacks natural energy resources, Italy historically has tried to develop independent sources of power by building hydroelectric capacity. Mostly, however, it has focused on domestic and international fossil fuel exploration. In this context, the key role that Italian oil major Eni has played is crucial and will be analysed throughout the chapter. The oil giant was established in the early 1950s by a visionary entrepreneur, Enrico Mattei, with the support of the Christian Democratic Party (Democrazia Cristiana, or DC) by merging several entities working in the exploration, refinement, transport, and distribution of oil and gas. Since

the beginning and throughout the 1960s, the company's business was directed at breaking the country's dependence on the international oil industry led by American and British companies. Among other things, Eni developed fossil fuel projects in the Po Valley and established autonomous relations with North African and Middle Eastern oil- and gas-producing countries, thereby challenging other interests in the regions. On a symbolic yet eminently practical level, Eni aligned the international energy technocracy with its industrial strategy through its Graduate School for the Study of Hydrocarbons (*Scuola di Studi Superiori sugli Idrocarburi*), located in Milan, which prepared a global managerial elite for the fossil fuel business.⁴

On the national level, the company has held close ties to all Italian governments, and today, the country's Ministry of Economy and Finance and the development bank *Cassa Depositi e Prestiti* hold the state's one-third ownership stake in Eni. The company is currently among the world's largest fossil fuel companies and operates in more than sixty countries at all stages of the oil and gas business. From 1950 to 2018, Eni ranked twenty-fourth among global oil and gas majors for cumulative CO₂ and methane emissions.⁵ The company also runs extensive advertising, sponsorships, and partnerships with multiple Italian academic institutions.⁶

Against this backdrop, dominated by the pervasiveness of Eni in the country's economic, social, political, and cultural spheres, the recent history of climate obstruction in Italy can be divided into five periods characterized by the development of consistent obstructionist narratives that emerged in response to both earlier and contemporary events. For analytical purposes, these periods are considered separately, albeit in practice their features and dynamics substantially overlap.

Period 1 (1990–2000)

As the science of anthropogenic climate change became more certain and consistent, directed efforts to counter climate action began to take shape in Italy in multiple ways.⁷ They consisted mostly of fully fledged forms of denial that disputed that the climate was changing due to human causes, asserting falsely that these changes were natural and have always occurred.

In the early 1990s, a rudimentary yet effective form of obstruction emerged based on 'instrumental realism', it largely used cherry-picked information, and redirected the responsibility for climate change to non-anthropogenic causes.⁸ Additionally, the increasing scientific consensus and the rising but still limited public awareness of climate change were mostly ignored or downplayed in mainstream media, which erased the issue

from public discourse. In the decade under scrutiny, there was a clear trend of decreasing coverage of environmental issues by Italian newspapers.⁹ For example, over the 1989–1994 period, the two leading dailies, *Corriere della Sera* and *Repubblica*, published 272 articles about climate change compared with the leading US papers, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, which published a total of around 1,000 articles on the topic.¹⁰

Period 2 (2001–2007)

From 2001 to 2007, an outright hostility to and denial of the available science on climate change took root. In this period, despite that individuals and groups within the Roman Catholic Church held differing positions on climate change, the Church—which had had a long-standing, prominent role in the country’s cultural, political, and socioeconomic debates—emerged as a crucial player in climate obstruction efforts. The politicization of Catholicism has a long history in the country: for more than forty years, the Italian Republic was dominated by the DC party.¹¹ During the first decade of the 2000s, however, such politicization processes went further and exploited religion for political gain on a variety of issues, turning it into a media commodity.¹² In terms of climate and environmental discourse, right-wing populists in particular saw the Catholic Church as an ally in their efforts to dispute climate science and resist action.¹³

Period 3 (2008–2013)

Climate obstruction during these years served mostly to shift attention away from climate change by consistently diverting the public’s attention from the problem.¹⁴ This period was dominated by the libertarian narrative, fabricated by the centre-right government led by Silvio Berlusconi (May 2008–November 2011) when the country’s attention was focused mostly on other issues perceived as far more urgent (e.g. tax reform, judicial reform). During this time, the climate change question was relegated to the margins by efforts to deny its relevance and the need for action.

Period 4 (2014–2018)

In the fourth period, the previous modes of obstruction gave way to something new in the Italian context: the right-wing ideologization of climate

change. This form of obstruction was rooted in previous attempts to dispute climate science through faith-based arguments, which, as noted, helped to fuel anti-scientific perspectives.

Politicians from both sides of the spectrum took advantage of the politicization and ideologization of climate change to implement climate obstruction. Paradoxically, in the almost three years of its mandate (February 2014–December 2016), the governing centre-left coalition led by Matteo Renzi waged war against renewables by introducing new incentives for the construction of major biomass plants and incinerators but reducing incentives for photovoltaics and by favoring extractive activities and the underground storage of gas.¹⁵

Period 5 (2019–Present)

The dominant role of Eni, the Italian oil and gas major, marks the fifth period. According to Rino Formica, an Italian politician who has played a prominent role in multiple administrations since the 1970s, ‘the weakness of [Italian] parties and politics has allowed Eni to capture the state’.¹⁶ While Eni’s role is considered central to the fifth period, the company’s influence had been significant and widespread throughout the periods described. Experts argue that this key role was also promoted through the company’s efforts to guarantee energy security during and after various sociopolitical and diplomatic crises through forging energy deals with fossil fuel-producing countries and developing fossil fuel infrastructure. Its reputational capital endures to this day.¹⁷

ITALY’S MAJOR ACTORS AND TYPE OF INSTITUTIONS

Climate obstruction in Italy is employed by numerous political, institutional, media, commercial, and financial actors. Most have close ties to one another while operating through different and sometimes overlapping modes of obstruction.

Fossil fuel companies and industry groups

Fossil fuel companies and fossil fuel-adjacent companies, such as pipeline operators and energy distributors, have engaged in climate obstruction through oil and gas expansion activities, lobbying, political influence

peddling, advertising, and sponsorships prior to and since 1990. Engaging in documented lobbying activities at both the national and European levels, oil and gas multinational Eni and pipeline operator Snam (owned by Eni until 2012) are among the leading actors in this space.¹⁸

Between January and June 2021, Eni and Snam met more than one hundred times with Italian ministers including Roberto Cingolani, former minister of the ‘Transizione Ecologica’ (ecological transition) under former Prime Minister Mario Draghi.¹⁹ The companies wanted to ensure that Italy’s COVID-19 recovery funds would be used to ‘tie us to gas for the next decades’.²⁰

The degree to which Eni in particular is entrenched in the political, social, and cultural life of the country, as noted earlier, also translates to influence in the decision-making process on the national, European, and global levels. Eni has portrayed itself as a crucial facilitator of the energy transition while also promoting reliance on ‘silver bullet’ technological solutions and offsetting as the best ways to address GHG emissions and climate change.²¹ While the company rebranded its utility services division as ‘Plenitude’, represented by Eni’s traditional logo of a six-legged dog rendered in shades of green, Eni’s business plan to 2025 remains focused on gas.²²

In 2020, the Italian Antitrust Authority fined Eni €5 million (\$5.5 million) for its misleading advertising messaging.²³ The company’s Eni Diesel+ promotional campaign had made clear references to environmental sustainability although, according to the country’s Antitrust Authority, ‘the product is a diesel fuel for automotive use that by its nature is highly polluting and cannot be considered green’.²⁴ In the course of the authority’s proceedings, Eni discontinued the campaign and, according to a statement, pledged to stop using the word ‘green’ with reference to its automotive fuels.²⁵

On 9 May 2023, on the eve of Eni’s annual meeting, Greenpeace Italy and the advocacy group ReCommon publicly announced Italy’s first climate lawsuit against Eni,²⁶ which began in February 2024. The suit rests, in part, on documents unearthed by the two environmental groups that show Eni had known of the risks posed by burning its products since 1970.²⁷ Further research²⁸ by nonprofit climate news service DeSmog showed that Eni’s company magazine *Ecos* made repeated references to climate change during the late 1980s and 1990s while simultaneously running advertising campaigns promoting gas, composed of methane, as a ‘clean’ fuel. Eni said it would prove the lawsuit is ‘groundless’ and, if necessary, demonstrate in court that it has taken the correct approach to decarbonization.²⁹ Despite these efforts to hold the company to account, the national climate debate is

driven in large part by Eni and its counterparts, with the direct result that the industry narrative on climate appears across many sectors, including politics.

Eni is also involved with the European and global network of associations and groups tied to the oil and gas industry.³⁰ The company and many more in the oil and gas industry in Italy are represented by the Italian Chamber of Commerce, Confindustria, which, as documented by InfluenceMap and others,³¹ routinely lobbies against regulatory legislation for fossil fuels at the European level and exercises political influence on the national level. Industry groups also have a history of weaponizing their political and economic influence to act in the interest of the companies they represent. For example, according to Influence Map, Confindustria has been lobbying the European Union to back new fossil gas projects while opposing policies to limit demand.³²

Beyond direct lobbying and the types of greenwashing noted earlier, actors in the oil and gas industry implement climate obstruction through a number of tactics that will be discussed later in the chapter.

Politicians and political parties

Prominent actors in the political sphere, many in leadership roles, also participate in climate obstruction by hindering the development of climate policies and environmental protection legislation; promoting oil and gas through a number of different approaches; spreading climate denial, disinformation, and delay; minimizing the urgency and effects of climate change; and delegitimizing climate activists, as will be discussed later in the strategies and tactics section.

These actors are mostly on the right of the Italian political spectrum,³³ as right-wing ideology overlaps, at least in part, with climate denial and delay. Members of the Brothers of Italy (Fratelli D'Italia), the League (Lega), and Berlusconi's Forza Italia parties have (1) prioritized advancing industry over developing climate policies; (2) promoted and facilitated fossil fuel infrastructure, national drilling, gas deals, and fossil fuel subsidies; (3) voted against climate policies at the European level; (4) promoted climate disinformation and denial online and through their social media accounts; (5) made instrumental use of discourses of climate delay in the public debate³⁴; and (6) attacked climate activists and movements.

These parties' position is to back the oil and gas industry publicly while facilitating fossil fuel companies' access to the public sphere. Right-wing Italian politicians have lobbied at the EU level, voting against European

environmental and renewable energy policies. In the European Parliament in 2018, for example, the League voted against all climate and sustainable energy policy proposals except for a directive on energy conservation in buildings.³⁵ While in the Italian Parliament, the League, including member Giancarlo Giorgetti, head of Draghi's government Ministry of Economic Development, abstained from ratifying the Paris Agreement.³⁶

Along with other populist parties of the European right, the League boasts of its 'green patriotism', geared toward supporting environmental conservation on the surface but without any real political impact on climate.³⁷ Ultra-nationalist parties like the League support renewable energy in their programmes and public statements because 'they are perceived to benefit domestic industries and people'.³⁸ More recently, such politicians, along with the Italian and European gas lobbies, have voiced their support for renewable energy in order to foster the perception that gas and renewables are roughly equivalent in terms of sustainability and can work together in a decarbonized energy system.³⁹ Under the leadership of the far-right Brothers of Italy party, statements by politicians in Giorgia Meloni's government, elected in September 2022, have commonly featured outright climate denial and climate disinformation. These statements have included decades-old arguments against action, such as pointing out colder temperatures to promote the idea that global warming is a 'hoax'.

In 2022, a new centrist coalition called Third Pole (Terzo Polo), led by politicians Carlo Calenda and former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, entered the political arena. This coalition promoted oil and gas expansion while advocating for nuclear energy and also denying anthropogenic responsibility for climate change and the urgency of action to curb emissions.

This obstructionist trend could be seen during the September 2022 snap elections, when politicians referenced the climate crisis in fewer than 0.5 percent of their statements on Italian TV talk shows, online, and on their Facebook accounts.⁴⁰ Above all, legislation for environmental and climate protection has increasingly been quashed. In July 2023, under Meloni's government, nearly €16 billion directed toward nine environmental regulations within the Next Generation EU National Recovery and Resilience Plan, including those aimed at fighting the country's hydrogeological vulnerability, were tabled.⁴¹

Think tanks

Groups in the neoliberal camp have also been active in promoting climate change denial and, more recently, delay. The most prominent among them

has been the Istituto Bruno Leoni (IBL), an Italian think tank that supports free markets and a non-interventionist state policy with close ties to the United States' climate denial machine. IBL is a member of the Cooler Heads Coalition, whose website is paid for and run by the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI), a major think tank with a key role in the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement⁴² As early as 2010, in an article in the newspaper *Il Foglio*, Carlo Stagnaro, then senior fellow and now research director at IBL, praised the outcomes of the fourth International Conference on Climate Change, held in Chicago by the Heartland Institute, and aligning the narrative promoted by the IBL to that of the American think tank.⁴³ This narrative was grounded mostly in the 2009 'Climategate' controversy—the hacking of an email server at the Climatic Research Unit at the University of East Anglia in the UK—which was subsequently weaponized by climate deniers: first, to 'prove' that global warming was a conspiracy just weeks before the COP 15 summit on climate change in Copenhagen and, second, to attack climatologist Michael E. Mann's famous 'hockey stick graph', where the 'blade' of the stick represented the rapid warming of the late twentieth century.

While presenting itself as a supporter of science, IBL imported an ideological framework from its American counterparts that fueled the politicization of climate change. On one side stands the libertarian, pro-market ideology that promoted opposition to any public 'interference' in climate action and on the other side stand the IPCC, mainstream scientists, and pro-government intervention environmentalists, who the IBL has portrayed as irrational, anti-modernist, and hostile to innovation, technology, and progress.⁴⁴ Francesco Ramella,⁴⁵ an IBL research fellow, for example, had long deployed the Heartland Institute's false rhetoric on the 'positive' effects of climate change, a myth associated⁴⁶ with the 'realism' narrative—a term used in opposition to 'alarmism' to delegitimize those who warn about the catastrophic impacts of the climate crisis.⁴⁷

Throughout its recent history, Italian climate obstruction, particularly in its institutional and political contexts, is in part traceable back to the US denial machine. On 26 and 27 April 2007, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (Pontificio Consiglio della Giustizia e della Pace) held an international conference on 'Climate Change and Development', which was attended by well-known denialist US think tanks directly or indirectly funded by ExxonMobil and the Western Fuels Association.⁴⁸ One of the messages of the conference was to discourage the use of birth control—and therefore also the promotion of abortion and distribution of contraceptives—as fewer people on the planet would allegedly not reduce the quantity of climate-changing emissions.

This reactionary position was eventually superseded by the new approach of Pope Francis, elected on 13 March 2013. In 2015, Francis published *Laudato Si*, his first original encyclical, on humans' responsibility to act on climate, which was followed in October 2023 by the *Apostolic Exhortation Laudate Deum*, a call for action against the climate crisis that strongly condemns climate denial.

Individual climate deniers

A large part of the misinformation around climate change in Italy's public sphere has emanated from well-known figures who deny the existence of, human responsibility for, or urgency of the issue. Franco Battaglia, a professor of chemistry at the University of Modena, was probably among the first outspoken climate change deniers in Italy, whose work since the beginning of the twenty-first century has provided some of the basis for denial messaging in the Italian media. Battaglia falsely argued that human activity had a negligible effect on climate change, which, according to him, was due to natural causes and was part of an endless pattern of natural climate modifications.⁴⁹ In the years following the publication of the IPCC report of 2007, for example, Battaglia attacked the report, arguing that it was funded and staffed by politicians motivated purely by hope of political gain unrelated to science. Similarly, Adriano Mazzarella, a professor of atmospheric physics at the University Federico II in Naples, accused the IPCC of missing the complexity of climate change: according to Mazzarella, humans were responsible only for what he called 'local warming' but not for 'global warming'.⁵⁰

In the same period, making arguments similar to Bjørn Lomborg's, which view poverty and climate change as mutually exclusive, individuals such as Antonino Zichichi, a professor of physics at the University of Bologna, focused on the idea that the most serious environmental problem humanity faced was not climate change but poverty. Such claims were also leveled at the IPCC reports, with their advocates postponing the so-called possible impacts of climate change to a distant future and land, far away from Italy.

Battaglia also contributed to the work of Galileo 2001 for the Freedom and Dignity of Science, an organization he established in 2001 with engineer and 'futurologist' Roberto Vacca and Renato Angelo Ricci, the organization's president and a professor of physics at the University of Padua. In 2001, Ricci was appointed as the 'government's commissioner' at the National Agency for the Protection of the Environment (then Agenzia Nazionale per la Protezione dell'Ambiente, or ANPA, a technical organization that

supported the Ministry of the Environment), with Battaglia named as coordinator of its scientific committee. In 2002, ANPA published a report, 'Science and the Environment, Scientific Knowledge, and Environmental Priorities' ('Scienza e Ambiente, Conoscenze Scientifiche e Priorità Ambientali'), which tried to weaken the credibility of the IPCC's science and, in particular, the 2001 Third Assessment Report. ANPA created confusion by making misleading comparisons and discussions demonstrating the alleged inconsistency between the IPCC's reports and its summaries for policymakers and by instrumentally emphasizing and distorting the uncertainties, controversies, and disagreements within climate science.⁵¹ As Oreskes and Conway put it in their book *Merchants of Doubt*,⁵² climate denial has been allowed to develop thanks to such contrarians being treated as 'experts' regardless of the reliability of their records and publications. Italy is a perfect example of this phenomenon, especially considering that several of the individuals promoting climate change denial in the early 2000s were based at respected Italian academic institutions.

The majority of these denialist perspectives are still present in the public debate on climate, often recurring among the same well-known individuals. They might have remained mostly at the margins if it had not been for some enabling actors, particularly media platforms. In this arena, one of the most vocal denialists currently is Franco Prodi, a former professor of physics at the University of Ferrara and brother of Romano Prodi, the two-time Italian prime minister and former president of the EU Commission between 1999 and 2004.

Media

The media in Italy work as an echo chamber and, as mentioned, also constitute a significant vehicle for denial and obstruction messaging. Media platforms including newspapers, online magazines and outlets, television shows, and their respective social media accounts engage in obstruction by spreading climate disinformation, promoting climate deniers' views and arguments, advancing discourses of climate delay, diverting responsibility for the climate crisis, signing partnership deals with polluting industries, hosting advertising and sponsorships with and by the oil and gas industry, and attacking and delegitimizing climate activists.

The public receives confusing messages via these media platforms, which then fuel the denialist and delayer perspectives. These platforms include traditionally right-wing newspapers such as *Il Giornale* and *La Verità*, as well as the *Il Foglio* daily newspaper and others. For example,

in the summer of 2022, while Italy was experiencing its worst drought of the last seventy years, two interviews were published in the paper *Il Mattino* during the last week of June. In one, the interviewee stated, among other things, that the UN climate data are ‘wrong and exaggeratedly warm to begin with’, that scientific information is ‘spread in a propagandistic way’, and that Earth is warm because of ‘millennial cycles and a lot of speculation’.⁵³ The other interview stated that ‘record heat is nothing new’ and is affected by the ‘influence of solar cycles’.⁵⁴ In another article published in *Il Foglio* on 24 June 2022, it was stated that ‘other than drought, the real water crisis in Italy is ideological’.⁵⁵ In 2021, when the cyclone Qendresa hit Sicily, a climate denier claimed on a prominent television show that human activity ‘has nothing to do’ with climate change.⁵⁶

Climate change denial, delay, and obstruction are also still promoted on mainstream Italian television talk shows. These include popular programmes such as *Otto e Mezzo* and *Carta Bianca* as well as widely followed radio shows such as *La Zanzara*, broadcast daily by Confindustria’s Radio 24. Messaging on these platforms generally follows a pattern whereby a climate denier is invited to debate climate change, energy, or adjacent issues with a climate scientist, climate campaigner, or environmental activist.

It is important to note that climate denialism, disinformation, and obstruction are widespread not only in politically right-leaning newspapers but also on platforms, channels, and broadcasts that the Italian public consider more progressive. The result is that the public receives contradictory messages that feed the perspective of the denialists, who have continued to leverage doubt about climate science, creating confusion on the causes and effects of climate change and disseminating political propaganda to obstruct climate policies.

Leading national newspapers also often engage in these modes of obstruction while downplaying the role of renewables in the energy system, diverting responsibility for the climate crisis, presenting inaccurate information about the actors contributing to the climate crisis, and promoting disinformation on extreme weather events and their connection to climate change. Media platforms including leading national newspapers and media groups also engage in minimization of the urgency to act on climate and the effects of climate change.

The ‘we will adapt’ argument is also commonly heard in the news media and aims to downplay the impacts of the climate crisis. Moreover, this argument implies that efforts to mitigate the effects of climate change are futile and frames adaptation as the only possible response.

Finally, the media echo chamber engages in climate obstruction by allowing fossil fuel companies, oil and gas industry actors, and other polluting companies to buy advertising that employs greenwashing and sometimes false or misleading claims. On 25 January 2023, for example, an article in *Il Corriere della Sera*, Italy's leading newspaper, claimed that an expert 'with a lifetime in the fossil fuel industry, a past in Eni and also in Russia's Lukoil, is really one of the best-equipped people imaginable to assess what is happening in the composite world of the energy transition'.⁵⁷

Analysis of media coverage in Italy shows that the climate crisis is often on the sidelines and not a priority in the news, with a general lack of attention devoted to investigating the underlying causes and the responsible actors.⁵⁸

Financial institutions and banks

Financial institutions and banks also promote climate obstruction by funding fossil fuel projects, infrastructure, and expansion. Unicredit and Intesa Sanpaolo are the main banks financing carbon-intensive industries in Italy, and globally, they rank within the top 100 banks that fund fossil-fuel industries. Between 2016 and 2022, Intesa Sanpaolo invested US\$21,031 (€19,228) billion in fossil fuels, ranking forty-fifth globally, and Unicredit invested US\$42,801 (€39,131) billion in fossil fuels, ranking thirty-ninth.⁵⁹ Intesa Sanpaolo also spent US\$6,294 (€5,745) billion in fossil fuel expansion between 2016 and 2022, ranking forty-first globally, and, over the same period, Unicredit spent US\$8,846 (€8,088) billion in fossil fuel expansion, ranking thirty-seventh globally.⁶⁰ Unicredit also ranked second among global banks for Arctic oil and gas financing between 2016 and 2022.⁶¹

SACE, the Italian export credit agency, also finances oil and gas operations worldwide and guarantees carbon-intensive industries and activities with public money.⁶² After the IPCC published its Sixth Assessment Report Summary for Policymakers in March 2023 and issued a 'final warning' that global emissions must fall, the Italian government published a policy for SACE that promised continued fossil fuel support past 2022, which is 'at odds with IPCC fossil fuel phase-out trajectories'.⁶³ According to an analysis by Oil Change International,⁶⁴ SACE is the biggest public financier of fossil fuels in Europe. Between 2016 and 2021, SACE supported €13.7 billion (US\$15.3 billion) in fossil fuels, and it is considering financing for international fossil fuel projects with projected emissions equivalent to more than three times Italy's entire annual emissions.⁶⁵

THE STRATEGIES AND TACTICS UTILIZED

Italy's industrial, political, and media actors have adopted multiple tactics and strategies to obstruct climate action, from blatantly anti-scientific narratives to scare tactics such as weaponizing energy insecurity to flagrant misinformation and disinformation campaigns to discourses of climate delay. They typically deploy their full armamentarium of climate obstruction techniques when climate policies and legislation are at the centre of the public debate and when extreme weather events contribute to visible evidence of climate change's impacts on the country.

The tactics and strategies described in this section and used by the actors described above are not mutually exclusive and, in some cases, overlap. Their ultimate, common objective is to delay or hinder climate action.

Outright climate change denial

As mentioned earlier, outright climate denial is still present and widespread in both politics and the media in Italy. Its main objectives in these contexts are to fuel the perception that the debate on the existence, causes, and urgency of climate change is still ongoing and to create confusion. Prominent climate deniers who employ decades-old arguments are hosted on major TV shows and interviewed by mainstream newspapers. These arguments include denying the existence and urgency of, and anthropogenic responsibility for, climate change, as well as falsely attributing the causes of climate change to other phenomena such as the sun. As described earlier, politicians toward the right end of the political and ideological spectrum also veer into outright climate change denial during their public statements.

Aside from these still present but more isolated episodes of outright climate denial, most strategies of climate obstruction make use of more subtle tactics.

Greenwashing and climate washing

One of the most common obstruction tactics used in Italy is greenwashing. Its main objective is to promote the perception that a business or organization is part of the solution to climate change, operates in a sustainable manner, and engages in clean and non-polluting activities—all in service of maintaining a social license to operate.

Greenwashing is used by polluting industries, especially oil and gas companies, and by politicians through advertising, sponsorships, and political influence peddling. It is expressed mainly through (1) misleading language and visuals, (2) use of selective facts, (3) stating outright falsehoods, (4) factual omissions, and (5) rhetorical distortions.

Greenwashing is developed through the use of language and visual tools with positive associations—for example, words such as ‘eco-friendly’, ‘green’, and ‘sustainability’, or images of nature with green and blue palettes. Greenwashing is used mostly in the creation of misleading advertising to induce consumers to buy a product the company wishes to promote as sustainable or renewable although it is not. Although greenwashing is a decades-old strategy, it is also part of a new climate denialism, widespread online and on social media, that allows companies to continuously mislead the public and evade accountability.

‘Climate washing’ is a common form of greenwashing that is visible in the wide gap between an organization’s public statements and tangible climate commitments.⁶⁶ Fossil fuel companies and major polluters thus adopt communication strategies to create the perception that their activities are part of the solution to climate change rather than being a root cause of it.⁶⁷

Greenwashing is also a common political tool in Italy, used by leaders and parties with the aim of obstructing climate action by deceptively promoting the perception that their commitment to creating effective climate change policies is concrete.

The idea of falsely portraying gas as a clean energy source and the message that it is crucial to the energy transition also fall under this strategy.⁶⁸ Terms such as ‘renewable gas’ or ‘lower-emissions fuels’ appear in online messaging from gas lobby groups and political actors as well as in politicians’ public statements and media interviews and articles. These communications amount to greenwashing because they downplay the industry’s climate impact.⁶⁹

Redirecting responsibility

Redirecting responsibility from business and industrial production to individuals is a common strategy of climate obstructionists.⁷⁰ Both fossil fuel companies and media engage in this strategy to divert attention from the industrial, political, and institutional responsibility for the climate crisis. The main objective of redirecting responsibility is to shift attention and accountability from production to consumption, from industry to individuals, and from systemic to secondary causes.

In 2021, one of Eni's promotional campaigns claimed, 'To change things, we need Silvia who is always careful at home not to waste water. Because Eni + Silvia is better than Eni'. The reference to individual responsibility is evident: Silvia, like Eni, is also responsible for the environment, and if Silvia is not environmentally aware, Eni cannot change things.

Because of its opaque and nuanced nature, this strategy is deeply internalized in numerous social, political, and cultural dimensions of Italian society and has been weaponized by bad faith actors when, for example, media or politicians have emphasized positive individual agency in solving the climate crisis.

Delaying action

More recently, 'discourses of climate delay'⁷¹ have entered the public debate on climate policy and action. The main objectives of this group of tactics include delaying climate action and denying its urgency while promoting the perception that something is being done. In Italy, these tactics (which may overlap) include but are not limited to (1) technological optimism, (2) fossil fuel solutionism and saviourism, (3) appeals to social justice, (4) policy perfectionism, and (5) 'doomism'.⁷²

Discourses of climate delay are used mainly by politicians, political institutions, the fossil fuel industry, and the media. Some right-wing and centre-right wing politicians, for example, recur to technological optimism by holding that technological breakthroughs such as nuclear fusion, for example, are real solutions to climate change and 'right around the corner'.

The media echo chamber has often reiterated this discourse of delay through the energy security narrative: the idea that, beyond the legitimate need to secure energy sources, fossil fuel companies like Eni have 'saved' the country during the energy crisis and in the wake of the war in Ukraine by providing alternatives to gas from Russia. The fossil fuel lobby, meanwhile, had similarly leveraged fears of energy insecurity in wartime, promoting gas as a means to maintain energy security, as a bridge fuel, and as a short-term fix for energy crises, all with the ulterior motive of ensuring fossil fuel lock-in for years to come.⁷³

Politicians also appeal to social justice and policy perfectionism to obstruct climate policies,⁷⁴ framing such policies as too costly or burdensome to the country. Social justice appeals promote the perception that there are other, more important political priorities to address (e.g. energy issues) and that these priorities are separate from and unconnected to

the climate crisis and environmental protection. Policy perfectionism, in turn, postpones action by setting unrealistic policy ambitions. Similarly, politicians also use discourses of delay to postpone the phaseout of oil and gas by promoting the perception that it is both too costly and essentially impossible.

Discourses of doomism and defeatism⁷⁵ are also used by political leaders and fueled by the media echo chamber. Policy statements also fall under this category of discourse when they raise doubts whether mitigation is possible, pointing to seemingly insurmountable political, social, or technological challenges. Defeatism also argues that any action we take will not be enough and that, in any case, it is too late. Like other discourses of climate delay, this strategy discourages climate action and any commitment to developing effective solutions.⁷⁶

Additional tactics

Italian obstructionist forces have used many additional tactics to curtail or delay climate action, including: spreading misinformation on renewables; using pseudo-religious or religious terms when referencing climate issues whereby ‘ecology’ becomes ‘a religion to replace canceled Christianity’ and switching to an electric car is ‘fanatical’⁷⁷; scare tactics, such as engaging in direct attacks on climate campaigners and using words such as ‘environmentalist’ in a derogatory manner, as well as advancing ad hominem arguments to delegitimize individuals who fight for climate action; creating confusion⁷⁸ around climate issues by inaccurately portraying the drivers and effects of climate change or promoting the idea that the debate on the existence of human-caused global warming is still ongoing; and engaging in sponsorships, advertising, and partnerships associating polluting companies with highly regarded institutions, events, and social, cultural, and sports initiatives to promote the false perception that these actors are part of the solution to climate change as well as social benefactors.⁷⁹

DISCURSIVE FRAMINGS

During the five periods described at the beginning of this chapter, Italian climate obstruction has been enacted using five dominant discursive framings. There has been considerable overlap of these narratives over the years, but, together, they have shaped and reinforced the complex Italian climate denial machine.

Period 1 (1990–2000): Defensive obstruction

During this period, climate obstruction had the objective of maintaining the status quo and was thus ‘defensive’, focused on the alleged nonexistence of climate change and/or the false notions that the phenomenon was natural and that there was still widespread scientific uncertainty around the issue. These arguments were advanced mostly by supposed experts in the orbit of the Italian academic world who lacked relevant expertise in the climate change issues on which they commented; they built their narratives on cherry-picked data or studies and focused on unexplained and anomalous details in the research while ignoring more comprehensive findings about the issue.⁸⁰

Their distorted narratives were repeated often in the national media and took advantage of the journalistic norm of balance, which assumes that every story has two equally valid sides and thus deserve the same level of coverage.⁸¹ During a time when climate change was largely unfamiliar to the public, such false balance promoted the perception that those who warned about climate change and those who rejected climate science (and thus spread climate misinformation) had equal standing.⁸² This tradition prevented the public from being properly informed about the nature and seriousness of climate change and ultimately favored the enduring climate obstruction the country is still experiencing.⁸³

Due to the often-inadvertent support of mostly complacent media, Italy’s defensive obstruction blurred the lines between facts and opinions, real and fake news, accurate information and misinformation. This stream of misleading discourses converged into a false narrative about the non-existence of anthropogenic climate change.⁸⁴

Period 2 (2001–2007): Oppositional obstruction

Following the path led by the George Marshall Institute—a now-defunct conservative US think tank funded by the fossil fuel industry that conducted campaigns to undermine the credibility of the IPCC⁸⁵—climate obstruction in Italy became ‘oppositional’ during this period. Opponents of climate action focused on attacking scientists directly, using false narratives of corruption and/or incompetence. In particular, those adopting oppositional obstruction accused the IPCC of political biases supposedly hidden in its reports, claiming that the UN body deleted and distorted evidence. They also continued to emphasize the ‘uncertainty’ of climate science findings

and promoted several unsubstantiated theories (e.g. that solar activity is the main or only cause of climate change). This type of resistance to the scientific consensus on climate change resembles the framings used by the Marshall Institute's most prominent climate deniers, Fred Singer and Fred Seitz, who accused the IPCC of 'scientific cleansing' and of unauthorized changes to parts of the report.⁸⁶

A prominent feature characterizing this discursive framing is the presence of 'logical fallacies':⁸⁷ the presentation of invalid conclusions achieved by oversimplifying and misinterpreting data, graphs, statistics, and the broader arguments in the IPCC reports. These logical fallacies still involved cherry-picking techniques and were further developed to support conspiracy theories, such as inaccurate claims of fabricated scientific data and corrupted scientific processes.

The central role of the Catholic Church in the life of Italians was ripe terrain for the unique turn oppositional obstruction took toward the end of this period. Climate obstruction actors intentionally used religious influence to shape discourses, cultural imagery, and behaviors. Through oppositional obstruction, religion and politics intersected in a mutually reinforcing manner: in the 2000s, Catholicism represented and advocated cultural and identity values linking religion, people, places, and the natural world, arguments that were then employed in the nationalist and anti-scientific rhetoric of Italy's right-wing parties.⁸⁸

Period 3 (2008–2013): Dismissal obstruction

Climate obstruction during this period did not confront climate science or scientists directly but centred on the obscuration and/or minimization of the implications of climate change to deny its urgency and, ultimately, discourage action. Interestingly, this discursive framing continued to identify the IPCC as the epicentre of fabricated climate science and falsely portrayed its reports, especially those regarding climate impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability, as the mainstream narrative on climate. To a degree, the dismissal obstruction frame is consistent with science denialism expert Mark Hoofnagle's FLICC framework: *fake experts, logical fallacies, impossible expectations, cherry picking, and conspiracy theories*.⁸⁹

A quintessential example of dismissal obstruction often reiterated by disparate fake experts in Italy was the need to devote greater attention to local environmental issues than to 'abstract' global climate change.

Period 4 (2014–2018): Ideological obstruction

In this period, the driving narrative was based on the premise that climate action is ideologically driven and threatens ‘our way of life’. It often pitted the need for environmental protection efforts at the domestic level against ‘globalist’ climate change policymaking at the international level. The tactics used to shape and justify this view were taken from the arsenal of ‘climate scepticism’ which, like outright denial, seems to reject the evidence of climate change. They included sowing doubt on the increase in global temperatures, rejecting the link between global warming and human activities, and denying the consequences of climate change.

Period 5 (2019–Present): Greenwash-and-delay obstruction

Far from outright climate denial or skepticism, the current form of climate obstruction is sophisticated and highly effective in eroding political and public support for climate policies, as well as in burnishing the image of fossil fuels and promoting the false image of gas as a ‘clean’ fuel necessary to the energy transition. ‘Greenwash-and-delay’ involves promoting the narrative that something is being done about climate change, with conventional fuels and their supporters positioned as the heroes. This narrative adheres to the notion of ‘fossil fuel saviorism’⁹⁰ and involves the advancement of arguments favoring ‘non-transformative solutions’⁹¹ in which technological optimism, fossil fuel solutionism, and ‘all talk-little action’ discourses are dominant (e.g. long-term net zero commitments and short/mid-term sustained fossil expansion). These arguments have also included promoting a greater reliance on gas as a matter of energy security, as mentioned earlier. Greenwashing strategies, such as emphasizing companies’ offsetting practices and using nature-evoking visuals in advertising, have also been central during this period. All of these tactics serve to delay truly transformative action on climate. Above all, this discourse has served to strengthen oil and gas companies’ hegemony and dictate a future entrenched in fossil fuel use.⁹²

CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored the intentional efforts by specific actors to obstruct climate action in Italy through a range of tactics, strategies, and discourses. The weak—and in many instances nonexistent—climate

commitments on the political, institutional, and corporate levels in the country show that these obstruction efforts have been at least partly successful in either delaying or hindering effective climate policies and tangible progress toward the national decarbonization targets necessary to meet international climate goals. In addition, whenever the country is hit by extreme weather events or climate change policies are under the spotlight, vested interests, individual climate deniers, and the media continue to fuel, circulate, and ramp up climate obstruction strategies and misinformation.

The problematic dynamics that have entrenched climate obstruction in the sociopolitical and cultural fabric of the country warrant further research. The interrelationships between the corporate world and politics in the Italian climate policy context is ripe terrain for further investigation, as are those between polluting industries and the media. Further research into how the processes of climate obstruction affects academic research into climate mitigation and adaptation, public perception of the climate question, climate legislation, and the decarbonization of polluting sectors is also recommended. Finally, further exploration of the best avenues for combatting current climate obstruction efforts will be necessary. These efforts may be constituted by a range of different strategies and processes, including social science studies, climate litigation, grassroots climate action, nationwide educational initiatives, and bans on misleading advertising and polluting industry sponsorships, among others.

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