Sustainable transition in Italy: the role of communication in institutionalization

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Abstract

The EU has seen a decrease in legitimacy in the face of several "wicked" problems, the climate crisis being only one of the many that the EU has chosen to prioritize. To complicate this process of prioritization is the increased politicization and emotional charge of said crises, both at the European and national level: political forces opposed to the EU have seen a rise in popularity in several European member states, one of which is Italy. Italy has a long history of not truly committing to the cause of sustainable development, and the new government seems to be following this trend. Polls on the opinions of the population show that people do not have a negative view of sustainable development, but are not well-informed on it. Looking at the communication of both parties pro and against sustainable development, it appears that both sides have adopted a communication strategy that puts the other side at the opposition from a moral level, while the very legitimacy of the EU is put into question through opposition to the Green Deal.

Introduction

As the attention to sustainability rises, the European Union has been establishing itself as one of the key actors in the process of sustainable development; such efforts culminated in 2020 with the European Green Deal, a policy package meant to help the Union become climate neutral by 2050 (European Commission, 2021).

However, in the last decade, the EU has seen a decrease in legitimacy in the face of several "wicked" problems (Bogdanowicz et al., 2023): the expansion of the Union has been characterized by crisis after crisis, from the 2008 economic one to the Arab Spring, to tensions in Crimea and around the topic of immigration. The climate crisis is only one of the many that the EU has chosen to prioritize. To complicate this process of prioritization is the increased politicization and emotional charge of said crises: this is evident as well in the rise of Euroscepticism that has accompanied this increase in

politicization of issues, leading to further polarization (Roos & Schade, 2023). This counts both at the European and national level: political forces opposed to the EU have seen a rise in popularity in several European member states, one of which is Italy.

Italy has been hit hard by several crises, from the one of 2008 to the COVID one, which worsened the social, economic, and political problems already present. Now, as a member of the EU, the country has to push the introduction of sustainable practices. This is also confirmed by a research done in 2023 by Ipsos, which indicates how the climate crisis needs to compete in severity with other problems, the main one for Italy being unemployment*"* (7,5% by February 2024), in particular among the youth (22% by February 2024); of this last category, almost 41 thousands left the country in 2020, a longstanding that has resulted in the loss of competent, young adults and the consequent worsened of the ageing of the country (Confindustria Udine, 2022), making pension plans a source of tensions. However, Italy has a long history of not truly committing to the cause of sustainable development, and the plans made in accordance with international agreements were seen as naive and impractical. This lack of commitment, added to the loose definition of sustainable development, resulted in a failure to institutionalize it (Pizzimenti & Di Giulio).

 In the aftermath of the COVID crisis, the country adopted the National Recovery and Resilience Plan[1] (PNRR), which includes a "radical ecological transition" based on three pillars: green transition, digital transition, social and economic resilience. Despite this, the 2024 budget law put sustainability in the back of its priorities: no strategy for the sustainable transition is outlined (Manzo, 2023). It seems, therefore, that the Government has failed again to institutionalize sustainable development, which puts the country at odds with the plans of the EU.

Nevertheless, the attitude of political representatives does not necessarily coincide with that of the population. According to research done by ASVIS and IPSOS, the vast majority of Italians (85%) connect sustainability with ecology and the protection of the environment, while only 34% knows that the definition of sustainable development as elaborated by the Agenda 2030 involves economic reforms and changes; even lower is the percentage of people that know about the social aspect of

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[1] Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza

sustainable development (Leucci, 2023). There is a clear lack of knowledge regarding the Agenda 2030 and the actual meaning of sustainable development. The attention shifts therefore to the quality and nature of the information that reaches the ears of the population, both from those that support sustainable development and those that do not, and whether that has an effect on the institutionalization (or failure to do so) of sustainable development.

The research question that this paper will try to answer is as follows: "*What is the role of communication of sustainability in the process of institutionalization of sustainable development?*"

Theory

Institutional theory, institutionalization, and communication

Institutions are supra-individual structures that dictate the interests and practices of relevant actors: they dictate the "rules of the game". More specifically, institutions can be understood as "repetitive social behaviours that are underpinned by normative systems and cognitive understandings" (Lammers et al., 2014). There is a distinction between informal and formal institutions: formal institutions include official rules and regulations, and include actors such as governments; informal institutions include norms, "taken-for-granted" behaviours, and values (Amenta & Ramsey, 2010). The process of granting rule-like status to a social or normative processes is called institutionalization. Tolbert & Zucker identified four steps that lead to the institutionalization of any given social norm or behaviour: innovation, habitualization, objectification, and sedimentation. The last step (sedimentation) can only be achieved through historical continuity, while a structure that reaches the objectification stage is seen as "semi- institutionalized" (Lammers et al., 2014).

At the basis of institutional theory, there are two key assumptions: firstly, the components of a system are interrelated parts of the whole system, therefore change in one component has to be followed by change in the others; secondly, the functioning of the social system is dependent on the existing

structures, therefore change occurs because of dysfunctions associated with a structure (Tolbert & Zucker, 1999). On this basis, the EU can be equated to a social and formalized system: changes introduced at the European level need to be translated at the national level in order to be effective. The second assumption can be equated to the introduction of the European Green Deal: the previous economic system was deemed dysfunctional (polluting), therefore the arrangement is changed to be geared towards sustainable economy. However, problems of coordination and the struggles to institutionalize at the national level what has been institutionalized at the level of the European Commission is at the core of the tensions among member states. Moreover, Although the EU has put in place mechanisms to facilitate compliance and disfavour dissidence, it has struggled to assert its authority in front of dissidence, exemplified by the cases of Poland (Bogdanowitcz, 2023) and Hungary and their descent into autocracy (a process called democratic backsliding) (Greskovits, 2015). This struggle to assert itself and the rising Euroscepticism of the last years can be linked to a decrease in legitimacy of the EU (De Angelis, 2017).

The process of institutionalization deals with the gradual acceptance of behaviours and ideas until they are so entrenched as to be considered "legitimated" (Jennings & Hoffman, 2017).
Adams defines institutional legitimacy as "the right to function without interference" (Adams, 2018, p.89). In order to properly evaluate the legitimacy levels of the European Union, political analysts make a distinction between three types of legitimacy: input, output, and throughput legitimacy. Input legitimacy refers to the degree of participation and representation of the population in the decision-making process of the implementation and creation of rules and laws: it includes the degree of citizen participation in this process, transparency of the governing bodies, and the level of representation. For example, a one-party government without the possibility of referendums will present a low input legitimacy level (Schmidt, 2012).
Output legitimacy refers to the outcome of said decision-making process: the government is seen as legitimate when their ruling power is imposed for the good of the population. It includes processes such as the effectiveness of policies, their responsiveness to the needs of the population through the implementation of said rules, and the impact of the policies on the quality of life of the population

(Schmidt, 2015). In other words, it deals with the perceived efficiency of governance (Lindgren & Persson, 2010).

Throughput legitimacy sits in-between these two, referring to the quality of the policymaking process, the efficacy of decision-making, and the transparency of information: in other words, it refers to the efficiency of the internal mechanisms that transform input legitimacy into output legitimacy. The EU has been relying on their throughput legitimacy to counter the claims of poor input legitimacy (Schmidt, 2015, p. 93), which are due to the bypassing of traditional representative government bodies (parliaments) and the lack of proper participatory mechanisms (Lindgren & Persson). It is indeed input legitimacy that is contested by Eurosceptic parties and those that oppose European integration, whether that is opposition to specific policies or a general mistrust of the EU as a governing body.

The role of communication

A key component of institutional theory is communication: the stages of institutionalization are achieved through a communicative effort from the formal institutions. Communication holds an important role in spreading sustainable practices and a sustainable mentality. This is due to three main reasons: 1. sustainability often presents a high degree of uncertainty; 2. sustainability goals often involve conflicts of interests, as they often involve a reshaping of the economy and the dominant industries, as well as the need for new technologies; 3. The implementation of sustainable goals involves the cooperation of several actors at different levels of decision-making, therefore demanding a high level of coordination (Newig et al., 2013, p. 2978). Newig et al. distinguish between three different types of sustainability communication: communication about sustainability, of sustainability, and for sustainability.

1. *Communication about sustainability:* it refers to the exchange and debate of information, interpretation and opinion on sustainability issues; this impacts our perception of sustainable issues as its aim is to inform and create a common understanding of the topic at hand. This type of communication tends to be common in mass communication channels and public debates, and it tends to be of controversial nature

2. *Communication of sustainability:* this refers to all the communication where the aim is to educate and spread technical knowledge about sustainability topics; elitist by nature, it is common among scientists, NGOs, educators, and every education-based communication. Rather than trying to create a common understanding, this type of communication creates a separation between the "expert" and the "audience" that needs to be educated on the matter. Its assessment tends therefore to be about its effectiveness, meaning "has it reached the target audience" and "has the message been understood"

3. *Communication for sustainability*: essentially, this is communication in favour (*for)* sustainable development; it deals with the normative aspect of sustainability and raising awareness about sustainable development in order to facilitate transformation. Its counterpart, therefore the negative discourse around the normative nature of sustainability, takes the name of "communication against sustainability"; its discrediting intent might not be overtly stated, rather it can be done symbolically by subscribing to sustainable ideas while pursuing opposite goals (Newig et al., 2013, p. 2980).

What unifies all three categories, at the political level, is the necessity to persuade the listener: politics has traditionally been associated with the art of persuasion, and the role of political actors and institutions is, partly, to gain the legitimacy of the population by persuading them of their arguments and ideals. It is this rhetorical process that influence the success of the process of institutionalization "from the top" (i.e. from formal to informal).

In the context of the EU, although each country is bound to the decisions of the Union, the communication of said decisions can affect its legitimacy, popularity, and success of implementation. It is this "translation error" that will be the topic of this research.

Sustainability in Italy: PNRR and the new budget law

As a response to the economic crisis following the COVID pandemic and the gas crisis due to the war in Russia, the EU has launched the REPowerEU, a project meant to bring the Union to a more sustainable future while simultaneously aiding in the economic recovery of its member states. The

project is based on the concept of sustainable development, which is defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED,1987). This definition is based on the triple bottom line approach, which divides sustainability into three dimensions: economic, social, and environmental (Jeronen, E., 2020).

As part of this project, Italy brought forward its own plan: PNRR (National Recovery and Resilience Plan). The Plan is valued at 194.4 billion euros, of which 71.8 billion are RFF[2] grants and 122.6 billion are RFF loans (European Commission, n.d.). The plan devolves around three main objectives: digitalization and innovation, green transition, and economic and social resilience (Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza, 2023). The goals included within the green transition plan are: energy efficiency, sustainable mobility, development of renewable energies and circular economy, and waste and water management (European Commission, n.d.). Initially, it seemed that Italy was on the path of completing all the objectives as planned, which granted the country the fourth rate of funds from the EU in February 2024 (Leardi, 2024). Indeed, the Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development (ASVIS) presented, in 2023, an evaluation of the PNRR objectives: 26/64 (40.6%) objectives have been evaluated as significant or sufficient, while 17 have been deemed insufficient or counterproductive. Nevertheless, it seemed that the Italian government has accepted the path of sustainable development as a viable mean for economic recovery and growth (ASVIS, 2023).

However, the new budget law complicates the situation. The budget law gives a snapshot of the economic and social aims of the government, as it indicates the budget that the government has in place for the functioning of the country and how it will be spent: on a budget of 24 billion euros, 16 billion are in deficit, meaning that it will be up to the next generations to pay it back; this is coupled with a rise in the taxes on prenatal care and feminine hygiene products, while the budget on healthcare is cut by 1.9% (on top of the 1.7% from last year's budget law). Looking at the social side of sustainable development, there are obvious problems with the current law. The environmental part is no different: there is no mention of the plans highlighted in the PNRR nor the budget that should have

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[2] Recover and Resilience Facility

been spent on them, while ignoring as well the area of environmental subsidies and taxations (ASVIS, 2023).

This is not uncommon in Italy, as the country has a history of failing to institutionalize sustainable development (Pizzimenti & Di Giulio, 2023): the timeframe spanning from 2002-2012 in particular is characterized by the systematic undermining and dismantling of sustainable development policies. The post-2012 timeframe can be considered a new policy cycle where sustainable topics have re-gained significant attention and urgency; however, in Italy the situation is complicated by the frequent political crises and changes in governments: from 2012 to 2020, five governments with different approaches to sustainable development succeeded each other. Pizzimenti and Di Giulio (2023) report how one of the concerns of civil society actors is the habit of only ceremoniously adhering to sustainability, therefore emptying the concept of sustainable development of its meaning and significance. Rather than a sincere belief in the normative value of sustainable development, the Italian governments' political adherence to this concept is driven more by symbolic salience (Pizzimenti & Di Giulio, 2023). Things seemed to change in the last period analysed by Pizzimenti and Di Giulio: from 2013-2020, sustainability gained importance once again, and the country seemed to be on the right track to implement policies in line with international agreements. It is important to note, though, that the new government was elected in power in 2022, therefore outside the timeframe selected by the researchers: the centre-right alliance that is now in power has a different approach to sustainability than the previous, more Eurocentric governments. Their attitude towards sustainability will be analysed by looking at the party programme and their intervention in Parliament.

Elections and public opinion

In terms of sustainability, the Eurobarometer reports that 37% of respondents see the European Green Deal as "fairly effective", maintaining a majority throughout all regions; the same can be said about the general opinion of the population towards the REPowerEU (35% responding "fairly effective"). The population is more united in its opinion of the NextGenerationEU, with 45% considering it as "fairly effective" (surpassing the European average). On average, it seems that there is a slight

optimism towards European-led initiatives. Differences can be seen between the priorities that the population attributes to the EU and those attributed to the national government. Although the economic situation results as the most important dimension for the future of both the EU and Italy, only 16% considers climate change as an important issue for the nation (fourth in order of importance), while the percentage goes up to second place (31%) when measuring the most important dimension for the EU. What this data suggests is that there is a decoupling of the concept of economic growth and sustainable development in the minds of the majority of the population. This is supported by other national surveys: although the majority (95-97%) (Ipsos, 2023) (EIKON, 2023) of the population is familiar with the term sustainability, 85% connects the term with environmentalism, while only 35% is aware that the Agenda 30 connects the protection of the environment with significant economic changes (Leucci, 2023). Significant is also the data that, among the 95-97% of respondents from the EIKON study, only 59% knew about the Agenda 30, knowledge that is mostly disseminated among the younger generation, between the 19-29 years of age (EIKON, 2023). This might be a good sign, however two elements are to keep in mind: 1) the drastic again of the population, 2) the already mentioned "loss of brains", indicating the vast amount of young, educated people moving towards other European countries for work and study. Considering that Italy is the country with the lowest incidence of young people between 18-35 in the EU (17,5% against the 19,6% of the EU) (Ufficio Statistico Regione Puglia, 2023), the fact that it is indeed the youngest to be the most sensible to sustainable topics might not be a necessarily good data from a political standpoint.

An important note to consider is also that 60% of respondents heard about the Agenda 30 through the television, radio, or social media (EIKON, 2023). This means that the idea that the population has of sustainable development is strongly influenced by the public discourse on state media and by certain personalities, possibly limiting the quality and type of information that is passed through.

Research Design

The aim of this research is to analyse how the communication of sustainable development affects its institutionalization in Italy. To do so, a combination of qualitative methods will be used to answer the research questions, namely discourse analysis and interviews. The interviewees will be composed of political and business actors operating at the municipal and national level. They will be useful to contextualize and add to the interpretation of the data. The website pages of the two governments and speeches regarding sustainability and sustainable development will be analysed: this is because these media are the ones that are the most accessible to the population, and therefore can affect the popular opinion of sustainability.

Discourse analysis is an umbrella term that indicates several methods of analysing textual or spoken information. It is based on the constructivist assumption that discourse has a role in shaping the perception of reality, therefore affecting the actions that actors will take and, consequently, social realities. Discourse is not just useful to communicate and understand phenomena, but also to construct a way to interpret and act towards the outside world (Milliken, 1999, p,229).

Analysing speeches both at the European and national level can help identify what Newig et al. call "communication *against* sustainability", and therefore identify a possible performative adherence to the wider concept of sustainable development as indicated by Pizzimenti & Di Gioia. Rather than looking for specific themes, this research will search for signs of tension between those for and against sustainability, and it will analyse the type of language used to describe sustainable development.

The issue of legitimacy is expected to arise, since, as explained above, the EU has been struggling to assert its input legitimacy. As sustainability is a topic that has received much controversy at the national level, claims of its illegitimacy are expected to be found. Finally, Newig et al.'s communication types have already been explored in the theory

The following table illustrates the speeches used for the analysis

Name	Date	Main topic	Speakers
Council and commission statement	12/7/23	Green Deal	Bellamy, Chahim, Gamon, Eickhout, Vondra, Ghidoni, Modig, Winzig, Arena, Lopez, Aguilar, Rougé
Assemblea Generale 2023, Assolombarda	3/7/23	Economic development, manufacturing industry	Meloni
Europa Viva 24	17-19/5/24	Party programme of right-wing European parliamentary groups	Meloni
Accordo per lo sviluppo e la coesione Governo - Regione Siciliana	27/5/24	Development of the South	Meloni

Regarding the interventions at the European Parliament, only MEPs speaking English, Spanish, Italian, and French have been analysed. This is because the media centre of the European Parliament does not offer the option of subtitles; therefore only those speaking languages known by me (the researcher) have been chosen. All speeches had a time limit of varying duration: those at the European Parliament had a limit of two minutes, the rest of the speeches had different time limits.

The interviews have been used as expert opinions to support or correct the analysis of the speeches, therefore covering the same elements searched in the analysis of the speeches.

Although the research on political communication is extensive, there is little research on the topic of communication of sustainable development in a country operating within a supra-national institution with an opposing political ideology; what makes the case of Italy relevant is: 1) the timeframe chosen (2021-2024), 2) the nature of Italy as a country at the heart of the European Union, yet that has seen a surge in opposition to the EU and supra-national institutions in general. Knowing the role of communication in the institutionalization of sustainable development can help businesses and individual act as an opposing force to government's possible lack of support. Changing the sensibility of the customer base could have a ripple effect onto the political environment.

Results

This sections will deal with selected documents and speeches from EU and National MPs, as well as interviews from political and professional actors from Italy. The interviewees will be indicated as follows:

- Interviewee 1: political actor at the municipal level, specialized in sustainable movement
- Interviewee 2: professional and political actor at the national level, specialized in communication

Europe: building a greener future

The current efforts of the EU to green its economy are part of a wider philosophy that is summarized by the European Green Deal. The website page of the European Green Deal presents it as a series of general goals that the EU aims to achieve that encompass the protection of the environment, carbon neutrality, the protection of those affected by climate disasters, funding sustainable initiatives, supporting farmers, and protecting vulnerable workers (European Commission, 2021). A massive, long-term project that demands the cooperation of all member states and all political groups in the Parliament. Nevertheless, not all political groups were favourable to the initiative, with the EPP (European People's Party) championing the opposition to the Green Deal.

Both the EPP website and their intervention during the MEPs debate "*Delivering on the Green Deal: risk of compromising the EU path to the green transition and its international commitments*" stressed how sustainable development should "work for everyone" (EPP Group, n.d.), with specific attention to farmers and "*those struggling in the green transition and advocated for fair competition for European Businesses*" (EPP Group, n.d.). The overall message of the text presented on their web page seems to indicate an opening to the normative aspect of sustainable development, but opposes specificities of the way the Green Deal is planned: in the aforementioned debate, representatives of the political groups EPP, ID (Identity & Democracy), and ECR (European Conservatives and Reformists) all shared their opposition not towards sustainability (with François-Xavier Bellamy stating that the law on nature restoration is "*worrying news, not only for those that work, produce, and live in the country, but for nature itself*"), but, rather, against the way the Commission formulated the plan itself, lamenting how much such a proposition will affect farmers, food prices, and those that struggle to keep up with the new norms and regulations, while favouring the import of food products from countries that do not live by the same environmental restrictions (European Parliament Multimedia Centre, 2023):

François-Xavier Bellamy (EPP)

"The law will contribute to the reduction of production in Europe [...] When we have stopped producing in Europe, we will not be doing the environment any favours [...] and everything we do to reduce food production will be done to offer competitive advantages to production outside Europe, which is devastating the environment"

Other speakers, however, stressed the role of the Commission as one that is overstepping their role and imposing itself over the Parliament and the Council:

Alexandr Vondra (ECR)

"The texts that went through the Council and the Parliament are more realistic than the one that came from the Commission. [...] I still remember in the past the commission as a guardian of the fairness. Today is trying to lead us but sometimes is taking almost extreme position"

Paola Ghidoni (Lega, ID)

"If anything, the Commission has explained with clarity its position: the objectives of the Green Deal must be reached at all costs. [...] 'Yes, it will destroy the entire European wine sector, but it's a price that the European population must be willing to pay because the agenda 2030 cannot undergo setbacks nor corrections' [...] The idea that the end always justified the mean [...] is the definition of fanaticism [...] That is why we will always say yes to the environment, but never ever to fanaticism"

André Rougé (ID)

"The ecological politics of the EU can be summed up with one word: recklessness [...] Favouring a punitive environmentalism to pragmatism and science"

The problem, again, is not environmentalism, but the way the Commission imposes it on the rest of Europe. Implicit in these interventions and position is the idea that the Commission is too removed from the realities of everyday citizens and their struggles, and that their environmentalism is too idealistic and extreme. The imposition of the Commission over the will of the parliament refers back to the EU's input legitimacy problem and the perceived lack of representation and participatory means. This approach is pointed out as well by Interviewee 1, which mentioned that the EU is facing a communicative struggle:

"I think that Europe encounters a problem, in general, of communication… because the EU is seen as the one that at some point intervenes [...] but this is because the nationalist parties, on this, they insist a lot on this idea of Europe as [...] entity that distorts our roots, that imposes limits on us, that worries about nonsense [...] The reality is that there is really a communicative distance at 360°"

Interviewee 2 mentioned the same communicative distance, adding:

"*The European ruling classes, at this moment, don't seem to be up to the challenges that we're facing. This is true for the right, but also for the left, because… the problem of the left is that yes, it's definitively more decisive on the topic of the ecological transition, but it doesn't do enough to explain - and convince - that the ecological transition is not only a due act for the future of the planet [...] The climate crisis is a material crisis! Even those that focus on the ecological transition do not do enough to explain this connection. The result of this inadequacy of the ruling classes is that the Europeans tend to be rather sensible to the sirens that say 'careful, if we keep going putting obligations [...] we'll crash our families' "*

This communicative distance between the EU and European citizens is not new, and it has been pointed out as problematic before. Schmidt highlights that, as a consequence of the Euro crisis, the Union moved towards increased supranationalism by adopting a "rule-based, numbers-focused governing of the Eurozone" (Schmidt, 2015, p. 91). The austerity measured introduces during the euro crisis, in particular in the peripheral countries, cast shadows on the legitimacy of the EU as a political actor. Moreover, the lack of a decisive ruling class with leadership characteristics amplifies the problem.

On being asked about the possibility of a link between Euroscepticism and opposition to sustainable development, Interviewee 2 affirmed:

"*Yes, absolutely. Just look at the contents and communication of the political forces more… negative in regard to sustainable transition… they're the ones that also put into discussion Europe. The League* [part of the government coalition] *is a party that chose as its slogan for its electoral campaign for the European elections "More Italy, less Europe" [...] And the League is also the one that says every day [...] "we need to stop with this nonsense of electric cars, green houses, etc… There's a very strong link, but that applies to all the sovereignist European forces."*

Looking both at the testimony of Interviewer 1 and the speeches of the centre-right political groups, it becomes clear that the EPP, ID, and ECR have been stressing the poor input legitimacy of the

Commission in particular to undermine the validity of the Green Deal: the EU is too far removed from the worries and living situations of the population, in particular farmers and "those that struggle".

The proliferation of this attitude towards the EU can be a significant obstacle to the process of institutionalization of sustainable development: if the Green Deal is seen as an imposition from above, then certain citizens might be less willing to accept it. On this note, interviewee 1 added:

"It is a general problem [opposition to the Green Deal] *that I think is explained as well by the difficult moment that Europe is experiencing. Europeans are populations that at this moment perceive a risk of a decline"*

The responses from the pro-Green Deal parties revolve around stressing the normative value of any action against climate change and the Green Deal in particular (communication for sustainability):

Claudia Gamon (Renew)
"To stand against the green deal is to stand against a liveable future on our European continent. And to stand against the green deal is to stand against the sustainable industrial future of the European Union. [...] Today reason prevailed, and the institutions can finally do their job"

Silvia Modig (Left)
"The Green Deal has been a success. Even though our targets are below scientific advice, [...] we have been able to put this ship that is the EU on a completely new course. And this is significant. And also this message, we must give to the Europeans who are feeling anxiety about the climate change"

Maria Arena (S&D)
"The Green Deal is, without a doubt, the positive sign that the Commission has become aware of the scale of the challenges set by the climate crisis [...]. It is paramount to show to the citizens that Europe is fit to protect them and reassure them of a liveable future"

Among some of these statements, some created a stark division between themselves and the EPP in particular:

Bas Eickhout (Greens/EFA)

"I think everyone in this room [...] has subscribed to the green deal, and we all agreed that we want our economy in 2050 to be climate neutral, to be fully circular, and to be clean"

Mohammed Chahim (S&D)

"Let's stick to the facts, let's cooperate, to give a better future perspective to our farmers. Let's sit at the table to give a better future perspective to our farmers"

These calls for cooperation are sometimes alternated with a discursive process of "othering", meaning to create a division between the in-group and the out-group:

Claudia Gamon (Renew):

"The European People's Party has decided to launch an all out assault on our common fight against climate change [...] They have shown that they are not fit to lead this house"

Bas Eickhout (Greens/EFA)

"This is a plea to the EPP: you had your...campaign on the nature restoration law. Can we now conclude that is over? And can we now sit back and come back at the table and discuss these things on a narrative, on our visions [...] and not on Santa Claus"

Thomas Waitz (Greens/EFA)

"Colleagues of the EPP, look... For today, the show is over. Could you please return to factual bases in your argumentation [...] This is something we're used from the right-wing here in the house. Is this really the standard that you want to form your politics upon"

Such statements, not uncommon for a parliamentary debate, are accompanied by pleas to return to the negotiating table and compromise. However, what is evident from the speeches is that each speaker does not take into account the arguments of the other side, rather they counter their two different visions, not only of the Green Deal and economy, but also of which citizens to answer to. Both sides claim to be working for the citizens of the EU, though they are referring to very different social groups: the pro-Green Deal parties answer to the worries of their own voters (those that "worry about climate change"), while the other side protects the interests of those that are worries about change and feel penalized by the Green Deal. This is in line with the construction of identity and "the other": both parties claim to be representing the will of the people, however their ideas of who "the people" are is)different; consequently, those that do not fit into the category of "the people" are automatically "the other" (Bracciale & Martella, 2017). Although in these cases the "other" population is not mentioned explicitly, it could be identified in the representatives of each other's opposite movement: the anti-Green Deal parties on one side and the Commission on the other. This kind of communication from both parties is likely to hinder cohesion and animate polarization. On this note, it is interesting to notice the phenomenon that could be called a "bias of reason": both parties participate into a competition of who has the most rational argument, automatically painting the opposite side as "ideological", "fanatic", "irrational":

Mazaly Aguilar (ECR):
"*When speaking in this plenary on the green pact, everything is coloured by ideology. Including in an imperative manner such as when Mr. Timmerman says that 'Europe will be green, or won't be'*"

Javi López (S&D)
"*Unfortunately, during the last times, we have seen how there has been a shift on the part of the European People's Party towards negationist positions that validate populist, extreme-right arguments*"

This kind of speech pattern seems to align with what is called "self-serving bias": as people tend to not perceive the opinions of others accurately, they tend to favour the arguments that fit their pre-existing world-view and evaluating the opposing side as "inferior". The distance between the two sides can be explained as well through theories on cognitive dissonance and balance theories, which introduce the presence of protective behaviours that isolate an individual within its own "bubble", meaning limiting one's interaction with opinions and arguments that protect and favour their perception of the outside world, including other social groups (Kennamer, 1990).

 Such animosity and communication style is not uncommon among opposing political forces; however, as the right-wing parties grow in popularity nationally, the chances of them reaching a majority in the EU is not out of the realm of reality. Currency, there are five countries in Europe where the right is leading the government (Italy, Finland, Slovakia, Hungary, Czech Republic), In four countries they are leading the poles (France, Belgium, Austria) or have formed a coalition (Netherlands); while in Sweden the support of the Sweden Democrats holds together the government coalition (Coi, 2024). Looking back at the testimony of interviewee 2, it can be concluded that, while the pro-Green Deal try to address the ideological needs of the population, the parties against speak to the fears of decline; interviewee 2 indicated, as it will be illustrated in the next paragraph, how both these attitudes can coexist in the same person: the ideological interest for the environment, but the paramount importance of material needs.

We will look now at the discourse by the Italian national government.

Italy under the new government

The new centre-right government in Italy inherited the PNRR from the previous technocratic governments of Conte and Draghi. Initially, the Meloni government managed to start the work for the implementation of certain objectives; however, the position of the government and the new budget law seem to indicate a different philosophy.

The new government is made up of a coalition of the centre-right, with the FdI (Brothers of Italy) party and its leader Giorgia Meloni at its head; the rest of the coalition is made up of Forza Italia (FI) and Lega (La Repubblica, 2022). At the European level, these three parties can be found respectively the European Conservatives and Reformist Groups, the European People's Party, and Identity & Democracy. These are all parties that, as seen before, opposed the implementation of the Green Deal to one extent or the other.

The political programme of the FdI gives an initial idea of the approach of the new government. It presents a mixture of social and economic reforms meant to kickstart the development of the country and its infrastructures to match it with the European standards.

On the topic of sustainable development, the party programme indicates a willingness to "respect and update Italy's international commitments to fight climate change" (Fratelli D'Italia, 2022); however, the speeches given on national grounds stress the willingness to "*stop the ultra-ecologist fanaticism*" (Repubblica, 2023), in particular in the months preceding the European elections, as the Prime Minister has launched a campaign of solidarity with other right-wing parties of a similar political line, namely Vox in Spain (Repubblica, 2023) and the Rassemblement National in France (Roberts, 2024). In an intervention for Assolombarda, Meloni stated:

"*The ecological transition is essential, but it needs to be done critically: we cannot dismantle our economy and our enterprises. [...] Environmental sustainability must walk hand in hand with the social and economic sustainability. [...] Let's defend nature, but with the human in: it is this the challenge that characterizes us with an approach much more pragmatic compared to an environmentalism that is ideological, and a bit myopic on certain dossier." (*Assolombarda TV, 2023)

The same arguments explored in the section on the discourse of the European political groups, juxtaposing their own utilitarianism to the ideological approach of their political opponents. Contrasting the practicality of their own stance and the ideological distance of the left seems like a winning formula in a country that values utilitarianism, as mentioned by Interviewee 2:

"The vast majority of Italians, land the vast majority of the European populations, sincerely think that protecting the environment more, face the climate crisis… are important choices. They tend to relegate them to the area of virtuous choices, not much to the one of utilitarian choices. This is a bit of a characteristic of Italians [...] they think that yes, in an abstract sense, [...] from a value point of view, it is important to take care of the environment, but that then, for the practical future of their wellbeing [...] we need to stop, because sustainability, that is good from the point of view of values, risks being bad from the point of view of the material wellbeing"

Important to keep in mind is Newig et al.'s definition of *communication against sustainability* (third type): rather than overtly opposing the idea of sustainable development, actors might subscribe to sustainable ideas while practising the opposite. This type of discourse fits within an environment that asks for practicality above virtue, as seen above. To quote interviewee 1:

"To change a culture [...] you need super-human efforts; to go backwards, it takes nothing. I had the opportunity to work under [...] for example the Conte government, [...] to see the difference with the current one… it's clamorous. Now there is the risk that a new reform on the traffic code might be approved that is blatantly punitive towards those that [...] worry about moving without polluting: instead of being protected, he's punished. For example: they made more complicated to expand restricted traffic zones, they have planned to introduce the requirement of helmet and insurance for micro scooters. [...] If the Conte government introduced [...] ground signs for cycling lanes, [...] now we're going backwards".

Interestingly, Interviewee 1 mentioned that the biggest obstacle to introducing sustainable initiatives is the "cultural backwardness" of the population, that does not accept change easily ("*there is a resistance to any kind of change*");

"In our reality in the South [...] with the excuse that people are used to move in this way [with cars rather than cycling] [...], acting on the habits of people is something that [...] requires some time to be absorbed [...] and hold on politically. Not all administrations have the strength to resist to these pressures"

Several points emerge from these two testimonies. First, interviewee 1 talks about cultural backwardness where interviewee 2 talks about a practical approach to the hierarchy of needs held by the country: although not synonyms, these two elements can coexist and fuel each other. As explained by interviewee 2, fearmongering the effects of sustainable development by stressing its impracticality allows the population to hold two distinctive ideas: sustainable development is good, but not if I suffer from it. Adding to this, the lack of an equally practical sustainable counterpart in the public discourse does not offer an alternative to those more willing to introduce sustainable changes.

Secondly, the difference between the north and the south of the country is mentioned again by Interviewee 2, who stresses its importance for the successful implementation of a circular economy and sustainable development; however, he mentions as well how this topic has never really received the attention necessary, and has been secluded to the margins of political debates.

"A small country like Italy, with 60 million people, on the long run cannot afford to host within itself two Italys so… different, and distant one from the other [...] But, again, that is a problem of the ruling class [...] The Italian - and European in general - ruling classes are overall inadequate [...] for the Mezzogiorno [South] *the panorama is desolate"*

The issue of the "Mezzogiorno" is a topic that has been part of the political discourse for decades, without ever finding a solution: the bottom part of the country reports lower economic and social developments than its northern counterpart, often being the scene for the higher rates of unemployment, environmental degradation, loss of youth, and a lower GDP (Senato della Repubblica, 2013). In May 2024, a new plan for regional and national cohesion and development was put into

place to favour the development of the southern regions. In a speech on the matter to the region of

Sicily, the government did not necessarily link the problem of the South so sustainable development,

however the new plan is strictly connected to the PNRR (Governo Italiano, 2024): firstly, the minister

responsible for managing the funds of the plan is also responsible for the allocation of the PNRR

funds; 2) the PNNR, in its section on the "Mezzogiorno", mentions what boils down to sustainable

development as the solution to the gap between the two parts of the nation.

	Missioni	Risorse *(miliardi di euro)*	%
1	Digitalizzazione, innovazione, competitività e cultura	14,58	36,1%
2	Rivoluzione verde e transizione ecologica	23,00	34,3%
3	Infrastrutture per una mobilità sostenibile	14,53	52,3%
4	Istruzione e ricerca	14,63	45,7%
5	Inclusione e coesione	8,81	39,4%
6	Salute	6,00	35-37% (*)
	TOTALE	**81,55**	

(Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e resilienza, 2023, p. 72)

The table above shows how the second mission (green revolution and ecological transition) is meant

to receive 23.00 billion euros; the topics of this mission are: waste management, reduction of the

dispersion of hydric resources, some mentions of the potential of renewable energy industries to

cooperate in the development of the region (Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza, 2023, p. 75).

The speech of the Prime Minister focused on the first two points, while stressing the need for more

socially and economically oriented initiatives: employment, infrastructures, opportunities for the

energy sector, favouring entrepreneurship, financial aids to businesses in the Southern regions,

healthcare, instruction, and the management of the sea (Governo Italiano, 2024). The last initiative

does not relate to the protection of the waters and marine biodiversity, rather to the possibilities of

maritime sectors (such as fishing, geological resources, aquaculture):

"*There is another piece in this strategy that I like to talk about. And that piece is the sea. The extraordinary infrastructure represented in Italy by the fact that Italy is a platform placed in the middle of the Mediterranean.*" (Governo Italiano, 2024)

Calling the sea an "infrastructure" links the image of the Mediterranean to that of something that is exploitable for socio-economic reasons rather than a natural entity worth protecting; this interpretation is supported both by the list of actions connected to the sea (mentioned above) and the section of the discourse dedicated to infrastructures, namely trains and roads, which are meant to boost the economy of the region:

"*Across the board we take action on the priority of infrastructure, because without infrastructure we can produce the most good things, we can have the most beautiful sights, we will always lag behind. If we don't start with adequate infrastructure in the area, whatever other initiatives we pursue in the area, unfortunately, will not give the expected answers.*" (Governo Italiano, 2024)

Thirdly, recurrent is the topic of the inadequacy or weakness of the political/ruling class, that gives quick answers but does not solve those material problems that do obstacle not only sustainable development, but even traditional economic and social development. Although interviewee 1 mentioned specifically the political class, interviewee 2 clarified his definition of ruling class:

"*When I talk about ruling class, I'm not just referring to politics. The ruling class means as well the social representatives, workers unions, the industrial representatives, the media, the intellectuals. All these pieces that make up the ruling class of a country, in Italy are [...] more behind than in other countries*"

There is therefore an abundance of noise that is characterized by both interviewees as "alarmist"; interviewee 2 mentioned how, without a decisive switch towards accountability from at least one piece of the ruling class, the population is led astray by the noise that warns of the dangers of change.

There is again a lack of opposing voices, as in Europe, that speak to the interests of the population while promoting sustainable development.

Depending on the reality that they find themselves into, actors willing to bring forth change might face not only the backlash of the population, but of the national government as well which, both in speech and action, makes sustainable development hard to implement independently of the political orientation of the national government.

A final note should be said on the topic of "cultural backwardness": although Interviewee 1 mentioned his challenges with the mentality of the people in a peripheral reality, interviewee 2 gives a more general overview of the state of the country:

"Italians, in countless occasions, have shown to be capable even of exemplary conducts. [...] Italy, in Europe, is a leader of circular economy [...] we have a level of recycling that is higher than the European average."

This view puts some emphasis on the power of the private sector to move the market towards a certain direction by offering services regardless of the political orientation of the country, as the desire to satisfy the ideological interest in the protection of the environment is still present.

Discussion and conclusion

To quote Elisa Flamini from ASVIS, "starting from a widespread awareness and growing public attention to the topic of sustainability, the challenge for institutional stakeholders, companies, agencies and the media are to create more and more culture on the topic of sustainability and the demanding programme plan" (Flamini, 2022). This is echoed by the two interviewer, which gave two perspectives on the situation in the country: a relatively more negative one, belonging to a peripheral

reality of a historically abandoned part of the country; one more positive, that looks at the country as a whole and individuates within the population the sensibility for the protection of both the environment and their follow citizens. It could be said that, even though the definition of sustainable development has not reached the general population, the willingness to adhere to its concepts (protection of the environment, of social cohesion, and economic development) are nevertheless present.

In an environment where there is already a certain degree of sensibility towards sustainable causes, but a poor understanding of sustainable development as a whole and a lack of institutional support, it is up to the private sector to compensate for the institutional disinterest and to use the resources put in place by the EU to bring change as a service to the citizens, that are willing to pay for it regardless of the political opinion.

It is worth stressing, however, the communicative challenges of the EU and the Green parties, that, in some countries, have started being seen as elitist and ideological, as indicated by interviewee 2. More focus on the practical, and economic side of sustainable development needs to be communicated effectively to the population, as well as the advantages it is going to bring to them. An enhanced knowledge of what sustainable development entails could limit the charm of alarmist claims by those that oppose sustainable development.

Both parties have adopted a secluding communicative approach where "either you are with us, or against us". Moreover, while the anti-Green Deal parties gave voice to the practical worries of the population, the pro-Green Deal side has not been painting such worries as an opportunity for sustainable development to solve said worries. The seclusion into two groups of "the common people" and "those worries about the environment" cannot bring the cohesion necessary to implement sustainable development as a new socio-economic system. To do so, sustainable development (or at least topics included within this wider practice) should be depoliticized and rendered appealing for the part of the population that is currently opposed to it (in the same way recycling has become the norm). However, such effort might be still contrasted by the poor input legitimacy of the EU. Rather than

being a distant entity, if the EU desires to bring forth such drastic changes in all member states, more tool for citizen participation need to be introduced and listened to.

The limitations of this study ought to be mentioned: time and word count limitations have been the main constraints to allow for a more comprehensive analysis. Future research could explore more in depth the phenomenon and compare the Italian case with that of other European countries in order to create a more pan-European, nuanced perspective.

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Appendix A: PNRR table

	Missioni	Risorse	%
		(miliardi di euro)	
1	Digitalizzazione, innovazione, competitività e cultura	14,58	36,1%
2	Rivoluzione verde e transizione ecologica	23,00	34,3%
3	Infrastrutture per una mobilità sostenibile	14,53	52,3%
4	Istruzione e ricerca	14,63	45,7%
5	Inclusione e coesione	8,81	39,4%
6	Salute	6,00	35-37% (*)
	TOTALE	81,55	

Appendix B: interview guide

1. Presentation speakers
2. Could you explain to me your definition of sustainable development?
3. How do you evaluate the actions taken by the government in terms of sustainable transition
4. What about those of the EU

5. In your opinion, how important is sustainable development in Italy? Ask reason
6. What are the main problems for the implementation of SD in your area/region/municipality?
7. From a communication point of view, how do you evaluate the communication/explanation/narration of the concept of SD in Italy and in EU?
8. From a communication point of view, how do you evaluate the efforts made by the EU to promote SD?
9. Do you think that the actions of the government and the EU are well coordinated?
   - Elaborate
10. The concept of SD is made up of a social, economic, and environmental part: from your point of view, do these aspects present different obstacles and difficulties?
11. In your opinion, is SD equal to economic development? Or are these two concepts seen as separate?
    - Ask for explanation