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THE FUTURE OF EXTREMISM

ANTI-LOCKDOWN

ACTIVITY: ITALY

COUNTRY PROFILE

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INTRODUCTION

From June 2020 onwards, in the wake of some of the most stringent COVID-19 lockdown measures in Europe, anti-government demonstrations began to proliferate throughout Italy. An amalgamation of anti-vaccine and anti-mask protesters joined forces with anti-5G conspiracy theorists and elements of the far-right to demand the right to choose on behalf of themselves and their children when it comes to vaccines, mask mandates and school attendance.

This saw the beginning of an expansion of the remit of the country's long-established anti-vaccine movement towards COVID restrictions more broadly. On October 10th the 'March of Liberation' took place over three sites in Rome.¹ Those who had previously protested about Italy's mandatory child vaccination programme gathered to protest the 'dittatura sanitaria' or 'health dictatorship'. Regular protests continued to be held in piazzas across Italy's main cities², and, until the end of 2020, the most prominent factions were made up of anti-vaccine groups like Movimento 3v (3v Movement), Movimento No Vax (No Vax Movement) and Libertà di Scelta Vaccinale (Freedom of Vaccine Choice), alongside groups of anti-mask activists. Whether focusing on vaccine mandates or mask mandates, these participants shared a hostility against the perceived loss of freedoms being imposed upon them by the Italian Government.

Over the following 10 months, these demonstrations continued to shift shape. A range of other movements began to coalesce around these shared grievances, with groups like IoApro - made up of restaurateurs and shop owners whose businesses had been adversely affected by government-imposed lockdown - organising protests. These protests became violent, as paper rockets, rocks and flares were thrown and riot police attended demonstrations.³ Whereas families made up a lot of the initial cohort of protesters, by the end of October 2020 those with a more obvious political agenda including factions of the extreme right began to attend.

At demonstrations on 6⁴ and 12 April 2021⁵, members of far-right groups Casapound and Forza Nuova continued to be overt in their support for anti-government protest and to offer legal aid to anyone facing police action.

A spate of more violent protests occurred after 15 October 2021, when Mario Draghi's Government introduced the 'Green Pass' requiring all workers in both the private and public sector to show either proof of vaccination, recent recovery from COVID-19 or a negative test result to gain access to their workplace, or face being declared absent without pay⁶.

OVERVIEW OF THE ANTI-LOCKDOWN MOVEMENT

A diverse group of communities coalesced as part of Italy's anti-lockdown movement to protest against what they believed to be draconian measures imposed by the State. The actors introduced below are to be routinely found at these demonstrations mobilising support both online and offline.

IoApro

In January 2021, IoApro ("I open") was founded by a Pesaro-based restaurateur named Umberto Carriera as a protest movement for restaurateurs who had to close down their businesses as a result of COVID-19 restrictions⁷. The IoApro movement was supported by far-right commentator, academic and parliamentarian, Vittorio Sgarbi⁸ and by the Lega Nord party leader Matteo Salvini, who interviewed Carriera in a Facebook live broadcast on 12 January 2021⁹. Calls to mobilise were made on Facebook and Telegram. 15 January was announced as the day when 'over 50,000 restaurateurs' would stay open and keep their shutters up despite the curfew, as part of a major protest against the Government's anti-COVID restrictions. Only a small number of restaurants participated, and national and regional newspapers branded the mobilisation a failure¹⁰.

Some may have been further encouraged to 'disobey' restriction rules given the offer of free legal support made to restaurateurs and shop owners who received fines. Those offering their services include Alessandro Fusillo, from Movimento Libertario – which calls for the abolition of the State¹¹ and praises those who resist "coronazism". Fusillo told IRPI media that "non-compliance with the provision of authority" is an "unfounded complaint" because the health measures are an "illegal order and in contrast with the Constitution"¹². Former Casapound candidate, lawyer Marco Mori, offered help and was supported in IoApro's Telegram channel for his videos denouncing the Government.



Figure 1. A Telegram user is being directed to Marco Mori's office for legal help whilst a fellow IoApro member agrees that they are facing "a war of the people against the disgusting Government we have."

Roberto Fiore, Forza Nuova and Italia Libera

Il Popolo delle Mamme (The Population of Mothers) is a collective of Italian parents who started anti-lockdown protests in June 2020. They have close ties to the far-right political party Forza Nuova, who are well known for their 'defence of the family' rhetoric, with both groups attending several demonstrations together¹³. Popolo delle Mamme are additionally supported¹⁴ by anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-abortion group¹⁵, Pro-Vita e Famiglia, the spokesperson of whom is Alessandro Fiore, the son of self-described fascist and leader of Forza Nuova¹⁶, Roberto Fiore.

Pro Vita and Forza Nuova are also closely connected. They are both linked by an address in Rome which is registered as the headquarters of Forza Nuova and is the address of mailing company Rapida Vis S.R.L., which distributes Pro Vita's magazine *Notizie Pro Vita & Famiglia*¹⁷. This company is also run by Roberto Fiore's daughters, highlighting the close organisational ties between the Italian far-right, Italian 'family values' movements, and anti-lockdown activity¹⁸.

After the 10 October 2020 demonstration in Rome, Roberto Fiore announced that FN would no longer have a political arm but would continue to participate in street demonstrations. Instead, Italia Libera¹⁹ was officially constituted as a "parallel government" with, among others, Fiore as Foreign Minister, and Fiore's deputy and FN spokesperson, Giuliano Castellino as Head of Programming. Castellino stated, "we are against the tyranny they [the Italian Government] have established, we are against the system, against Conte and against false opposition. Only us for a free Italy!"²⁰

The first operational meeting of Italia Libera was planned for 16 October 2020, where, it was announced, Roberto Fiore would communicate "the formation, reasons and programmes of the Government to the embassies of the USA, Belarus, Russia and Tanzania, nations that have denounced the interference of WHO in their internal affairs and claiming sovereignty against the directives of this organisation and of every elitist and anti-popular body of the new world order"²¹.



Figure 2. Italia Libera material listing cabinet members including Robert Fiore as Foreign Minister and Giuliano Castellino as Minister for the Implementation of the programme for National Liberation

Casapound

The extreme right-wing movement Casapound²² adopted similar tactics to Forza Nuova, politicising the pandemic, particularly to advance their anti-immigration agenda. Whilst Forza Nuova focussed on public health and railed against the impact on civil liberties, Casapound called for ports to be closed to immigrants whom they baselessly claimed were bringing the virus to Italy and spreading it exponentially.



Figure 3. Casapound's official Twitter account called for Ports to be closed to stop the spread of the Delta Variant.

Anti-vax medics

A coterie of anti-vax medics also mobilised the Italian public to take action against the State. An investigation by Fanpage.it identified chief proponents such as ex-nurse Rafaele Varvara who gave up his career in public health to become a full-time anti-government activist and was been filmed encouraging his supporters to use violence if 'strictly necessary.'²³ Additionally, struck-off gynaecologist Roberto Petrella claimed that those who have the COVID vaccine 'will surely die.'²⁴ Establishment figures such as Dott Carlo Arnese, health director of the ASL for Naples, stated that he is 'No COVID Vax' and that the Green Pass is a "Nazi-fascist pass."²⁵ These actions from medical professionals gave credibility to the protesters and amplified distrust in the Government's anti-COVID measures.

Other far-right movements

Other smaller nationalist groups such as Italia D.O.C., active on the Russian social media platform VK, promoted disinformation surrounding the vaccine and allied themselves with the far-right group, La Rosa Bianca, Italia (the White Rose, Italy) to support both anti-vaccine protests and the anti-green passport protests that took place in Trieste in October 2021.



Figure 4. An Italian D.O.C. member thanks La Rosa Bianca for their support during a protest in Rome in October 2021 and states that reports in the *Il Fatto Quotidiano* newspaper of unrest were untrue.

HARMFUL ACTIVITY

Call for violence from online communities were reported in the media for the duration of anti-government protests in Italy²⁶. These calls translated into off-line action and real world harm. In April 2021, loApro were among the key organisers of a day of protest throughout Italy, at which Carriera and his supporters congregated in Piazza Montecitorio outside the Italian Parliament. A speech ("We are here to occupy the Piazza. We are ready to enter. They will not let us. We are ready to break through. Let's go, go, go.")²⁷ by Carriera was criticised for inciting violence after flares and smoke bombs were thrown and a successful attempt was made to break through a police cordon²⁸. Supporters also issued calls to violence on the loApro Telegram account, with one user encouraging a repeat of the storming of the Serbian Parliament and another suggesting that they are willing to use 'arms if necessary.'



Figure 5. Screenshot from the loApro Telegram group. Conversation reads: 'we don't vote, we don't go out, they [the Government] decide when we breathe we need a violent revolution like Serbia they deny [our] rights and the people, like sheep, obey' and 'It's time to stand up for ourselves, with weapons if necessary'.

Intimidation and threats towards the media also intensified over the course of the pandemic. Well-known Domani journalist Selvaggia Lucarelli was headbutted during an anti-vax demonstration in Rome in November by a protester when she asked him "why are you here today?"²⁹

Politicians have also been subject to online abuse and death threats with Head of State, Sergio Mattarella, former Prime Ministers Giuseppe Conte and Mario Monti all receiving direct threats to their safety³⁰. Separately, video has been shared on 'Basta Dittatura!' (Enough Dictatorship!), an anti-lockdown Telegram chat, of an individual threatening to kidnap a politician and threats of violence against politicians, the media and medical staff. This online channel, now closed down, had more than 43,000 members and was one of the main forums for anti-vax and conspiracy theorists to spread disinformation and threats against their adversaries. So extreme were these threats that in November 2021 the DIGOS (Divisione Investigazioni Generali e Operazioni Speciali) anti-terrorist police conducted a series of raids across in 16 cities across Italy, arresting 10 anti-government protestors linked to anti-vax and Forza Nuova communities after online threats from Basta Dittatura³¹.

Forza Nuova's infiltration of the 'No Green Pass' movement peaked with the incitement to storm the CGIL (trade union) building on 9 October, causing tens of thousands of euros worth of damage and leading to the arrest of founder Roberto Fiore, spokesperson Giuliano Castellino and loApro's Modena representative, Biagio Passaro³². The relationship between Forza Nuova and loApro is confirmed by video footage of a meeting between respective members to co-ordinate a protest³³.

CONCLUSION

The anti-government protests in Italy started as a series of seemingly benign gatherings of a couple of hundred members of primarily family-based groups who had connected on Facebook. However, they quickly morphed into aggressive and overtly violent demonstrations with rockets and stones thrown at police cordons, attempts to charge Government buildings and direct threats of harm towards members of the political, medical and media establishments. An increase in the incendiary nature of these protests was engendered by the infiltration of far-right movements into the broader anti-lockdown community, with the escalation of calls to arms and use of violence espoused on group chats on social media becoming commonplace and resulting in real-world harm.

The arrest of members of Forza Nuova, IoApro and from the anti-vax movements during the CGIL protest in October 2021 show how these factions no longer act in isolation but have formed an amorphous movement united in their ambition to violently overthrow COVID-19 restrictions with the use of force and intimidation. Anti-government actors no longer acting in isolation instead grouped their representative factions to offer strength in numbers and reciprocal support in their desire to undermine the Italian Government. This has been compounded by the introduction of the Italian State's Green Pass regulations, with protesters comparing the new vaccine mandate with Nazi eugenics and citing it as an example of the contempt with which elites hold ordinary working citizens.

These corrosive elements of Italy's anti-vaccine movement have become a fulcrum for the far-right. In particular, Forza Nuova deployed covert tactics by organising and promoting protests fronted by other groups, such as Popolo delle Mamme, which allowed them to maintain a veneer of respectability. As more individual groups formed, Forza Nuova pivoted and exploited an increase in numbers to become overt, vocal and determined to incite violence both on and offline. With their leader and spokesperson's trial having started on 2 March³⁴, alongside Draghi's announcement that Italy's State of Emergency will end on 31 March 2022³⁵, it will be significant to note what role these actors may play in any anti-government protests going forward or if future demonstrations will once again shift shape.

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