

# Tracking the Political Scope of Ultraconservative Christian-Right Movements in Italy

## Strategies, Mobilizations, and Narratives

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### Introduction

In the days during which Italy debated over the storming of the headquarters of the CGIL, the country's main workers' union, in Rome (October 9, 2021) by the neo-fascist extreme-right movement Forza Nuova (Bruno, Downes, and Scopelliti 2021), Giorgia Meloni was in Spain for a rally organized by the Spanish radical-right party VOX. The charismatic leader of Brothers of Italy set the crowd on fire in Madrid with a speech that is already famous: "Yo soy Giorgia, soy una mujer, soy cristiana" (*Corriere della Sera* 2021; Euronews 2021). Meloni claimed that "these identities are currently under attack", although nobody can oblige her or anybody else to deny these fundamental features (Sondel-Cedarmas 2022). The reference to being Christian has a relevance of the first order. In fact, the political right and far-right parties, and their recent transformations (Köttig, Bitzan, and Petö 2017), such as the transformation of Matteo Salvini's Lega (Bolzonar 2021) from being a regional-based party to a national party, have accustomed us in recent years to winking at the most conservative movements among the vast galaxy of the Italian Catholic world. At the beginning of 2019, Italy was inhabited by 60.3 million residents, of whom 55.5 million were Italian citizens (91.3%) and 5.25 million were foreigners (8.7%). Among the Italians, 82.2% were Christian (80% Catholic Christian), 16.3% were atheist or agnostic, and 1.5% professed other religions (Italia in Dati 2020). Accordingly, the (Catholic) Christian Right always seek to intercept a large part of *moderate* Italian Catholics.

The Italian case is not comparable, either quantitatively or qualitatively, to that of other countries, such as the United States, Russia, and Eastern Eu-

ropean countries (Graff and Korolczuk 2021). Still, as in other countries, the trajectory of ultraconservative Christian-right movements has developed in a counter-revolution (Raison du Cleuziou 2019). A favorable political opportunity structure marked by the retreat of the religious element from the party-political system (Prearo 2020) is one of the determinants that could explain such a renewal of ultraconservative Christian mobilizations in Italy. More specifically, since the 1990s, Italy has been experiencing a dismantling of the Catholic party of Christian Democracy (Ozzano 2020) and a collapse of the *First Republic*. Since then, new parties have emerged in the Italian right-wing sphere, including Go Italy (Forza Italia), which introduced itself as the new moderate right wing, Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia), which inherited the Italian neofascist political culture, and the League (Lega) a sort of anti-political, anti-clerical, and anti-systemic party. For over 20-years, Go Italy was the political party that dominated the right-wing coalition. After the general elections of 2018, where the League made its best score ever, becoming the leading party within the right-wing coalition. More recently, the general elections of 2022 offered a quite different landscape with Brothers of Italy becoming the first party within the coalition and in Italy, with a score of 26%. Alongside the right-wing radicalization of the Italian electorate, the galaxy of Italian ultraconservative Catholic movements has reshaped the landscape of the *traditional* Catholic mobilizations in Italy, displacing their political positioning to the right and the far right in order to build alliances with parties seeking an ideological renewal, such as Brothers of Italy and the League (Albertazzi, Giovannini, and Seddone 2018).

The purpose of this chapter is to shed light on the strategies that ultraconservative Christian-Right movements have been using in recent years. In the first section we focus on the new path of Italian ultraconservative Catholic activism and the emergence of the *anti-gender* issue and its politicization. In the second and third sections, we briefly highlight the main frame of the discourses mobilized by the actors in both the religious and political fields. We conclude by examining the political effect of the Christian Right in Italy, indicating the particular relation that this particular kind of religious-based movement seems to have with the Catholic Church in Italy and, of course, with the Vatican.

## Positioning the main actors in the ultraconservative Christian-Right galaxy

Between 2013 and 2015, the Italian Parliament, led by a center-left majority, found itself debating three *sensitive* issues for this Catholic sphere: the fight against homophobia and transphobia, gender education programs in schools, and same-sex unions. In this period, a particularly polarized heated public debate on these religious matters, and the strong opposition from center and right-wing MPs, opened a window of political opportunity for these new ultraconservative Catholic movements. In fact, since 2013, they have been organizing an important *anti-gender* campaign (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017), mobilizing within the spaces of Italian Catholicism: the parishes.

In these spaces, as well as through a new organization whose format was imported from France, La Manif Pour Tous Italia, these ultraconservative Catholic movements have organized conferences and meetings to recruit potential activists and volunteers and build a *community of the movement* (Taylor and Whittier 1992). On June 20, 2015, a small number of ultra-conservative Catholic groups founded the Comitato Difendiamo I Nostri Figli (Defending our Children Committee) to coordinate an important event: Family Day. The name Family Day echoes the format of a similarly named demonstration that was organized by the Episcopal Conference of Italy (CEI) in 2007 against a bill on same-sex couples' rights, which was later abandoned. Apparently identical, these two events mark a crucial step in Italian Catholic activism. In fact, a sequence of ultraconservative Catholic reactions (Della Sudda and Avanza 2017) arose against the moderate and compromising strategy implemented by the Roman Catholic Church on the so-called *non-negotiable* issues of life and family. One of the critical moments of this sequence was the importation of the *March for Life* between 2011 and 2012 by two pro-life Italian and transnational organizations: Famiglia Domani (Family Tomorrow) and the European Movement in Defense of Human Dignity and Life (MEDV). In particular, Famiglia Domani and its supporters have been very active in organizing events, meetings, and forums, with guest speakers such as Roberto De Mattei of the Lepanto Foundation and Raymond Leo Cardinal Burke, who is very close to Steve Bannon and is one of the most traditionalist and ultra-conservative clerics in the Catholic Church.

In the March for Life context, the fight against the *theory of gender* or *gender ideology* emerges as a new cause of mobilization, especially for two new organizations: ProVita and Jurists for Life. This new mobilization process can be

defined as a mobilization *from below*, as it transcends the religious affiliations of the individuals who engage in the political field.

After two years of intense and local campaigning, in June 2015, these groups and organizations, composed almost exclusively of laypeople, took about 400,000 people to the streets. The media and the literature identify the *anti-gender movement* in Italy as a secularized, apolitical, and non-confessional identity composed almost exclusively of radical and uncompromising ultra-conservative Catholic Christians. At the time, the newspaper *La Repubblica* spoke of a “Family Day galaxy” (2015) to indicate the set of actors present in the streets, recording the absence of the Catholic hierarchy and, above all, of the CEI. In particular, ProVita Onlus played a significant role in linking groups and sharing information by publishing a magazine on pro-life issues: *Notizie ProVita*. Thanks, in particular, to its president, Tony Brandi, a regular attendee of the World Congress of Families meetings, ProVita maintains and develops links at the international and transnational levels of pro-life and anti-gender mobilization. The group defines itself as *non-political* and *non-partisan*. However, as evidenced by a lengthy investigation by the *Corriere della Sera*, it has documented ties with the neofascist party Forza Nuova (Pinotti and Tebano 2017).

Giuristi per la Vita is a task force composed of lawyers and jurists who aim to operationalize the pro-life and anti-gender struggle through the instrument of law in the courts. In 2014, their first success was to prevent the dissemination in schools of three information booklets on gender education, which were distributed by the National Anti-Racial Discrimination Office (UNAR) and the Government’s Equal Opportunities Department as part of the fight against discrimination related to sexual orientation and gender identity. In summer 2013, on the initiative of young Roman Neocatechumenals, and supported by Catholic MP Luca Volontè (founder of the Novae Terrae Foundation and since 2018 president of the Dignitatis Humanae Institute), La Manif Pour Tous Italia was founded with the agreement and support of the *mother* French organization La Manif Pour Tous and its leader Ludivine de La Rochère. In 2016, the group changed its corporate name. It became Generazione Famiglia. It managed to capitalize on previous anti-gender mobilizations, nationalizing their identity and extending the field of struggle by including *pro-family* rhetoric to gain influence in Italian electoral campaigns. In 2019, at the World Congress of Families, ProVita Onlus and Generazione Famiglia announced that they were merging into one organization: ProVita & Famiglia. Moreover, the Comitato Difendiamo i Nostri Figli, created in 2015 as the organization for

coordinating the Family Day event and led by Massimo Gandolfini (a Catholic and Neocatechumenal physician who was already active in the Italian pro-life associations), has played a strategic leadership role in the media and the political field. In 2018, one of the co-founders of the Comitato, Simone Pillon (a Neocatechumenal pro-life activist lawyer), was elected as a senator for the League.

These organizations constitute the entrepreneurs (Cobb and Elder 1972) of the pro-life, anti-gender, and pro-family cause, whose characteristics, and probably also reasons for their success, are, on the one hand, a secularized, *non-religious* positioning with respect to the Catholic Church and, on the other, a *movementist* positioning with respect to the political parties. In other words, the specificity of the Italian ultraconservative movement's entrepreneurship composed of lay Catholics is to position itself in a non-competitive manner with respect to the two spheres that define the identity of the movement: the religious and the political.

### **Varieties of movements: Insights from World Congress of Families XIII**

A further moment of strong mobilization was undoubtedly World Congress of Families (WCF) XIII in Verona in 2019. With the support of both local institutions and international organizations such as Citizen Go, the International Organization for the Family, and the National Organization for Marriage, this new non-religious and movementist cartel positioned itself as a hegemonic actor in the *Family Day galaxy*.

To understand the extremely variegated composition of the Italian ultraconservative Christian-Right galaxy in this new pro-life/anti-gender/pro-family sequence that is renewing the field of ultraconservative Catholic activism, it is necessary to distinguish between a mainstream area and a satellite area. In the former, we find the entrepreneurs of the cause, with the functions of institutional participation (e.g., ProVita & Famiglia is part of the consultative National Forum of Parent Families, established at the Ministry of Education) and political representation (e.g., participating in parliamentary commissions' debates and thus influencing the course of policies on issues such as same-sex civil unions or even stopping them, as in the case of the so-called *Zan Bill*, a proposed bill against hate crimes). More generally, they seek to occupy—or infiltrate—public and media spaces through shock actions, such as posters expos-

ing the *fetus* to make citizens and especially women *more sensitive* toward abortion. Moreover, there is a whole constellation of satellite organizations participating in mobilizations with more or less consistent numbers and playing a *local* function, so to speak, on the margins of this galaxy. These are, by contrast, more likely to manifest religious and non-secularized positions, as well as opposition to the secularized party politics and institutions of the state, and they are often closer to branches of the extreme right and anti-ecclesiastical positions.

In addition to the institutional and political presence at the WCF, more religious and more radical satellite organizations attended the closing demonstration at the Congress. Thanks to the official photos on the Facebook page of WCF XIII in Verona, we were able to identify the following organizations: Alleanza Cattolica, Ora et labora in difesa della vita, Associazione culturale Contra Tenebras, Movimento con Cristo per la vita, Movimento mariano, Centro culturale “il Faro”, Movimento evangelico famiglie italiane, Comitato Beato Mingus Agustin Pro – Viva Cristo Re, Circolo cattolico Christus Rex, Militia Christi, and the better-known Giuristi per la Vita and Movimento per la Vita. It is to be noted that only representatives of Christian religions (e.g., the Orthodox Archbishop of Budapest and Vienna, the Chairman of the Patriarchal Commission for Family and Motherhood of the Patriarchy of Moscow, the President of the Federation of Italian Pentecostal Churches, and the President of the Italian Evangelical Alliance) and representatives of the movement’s entrepreneurs were allowed to appear as speakers.

The Italian ultraconservative Christian Right can be defined more as a space than a movement. In fact, it is a heterogeneous galaxy with *local* organizations characterized by religious and political specific identities and a center dominated by groups of activists, leaders, and, more generally, entrepreneurs of this religious and political cause. While satellite organizations participate and mobilize *from below*, the entrepreneurs produce discourses and campaigns to influence public debate on life, gender, sexuality, family, and religious freedom issues, becoming involved in political and electoral processes. From the top, they circulate discourses and narratives that are ready to use and can easily be reproduced without specific skills or experience of activism, even by the *grassroots* politically right-wing churchgoers who identify themselves with ultraconservative Christian claims (Lavizzari 2020). Such people seem to perceive themselves as victims of a weakened and powerless Catholic Church and of a secularized state led by *genderist* and *homosexualist* lobbies. The following

section takes a deeper look at the narratives and discourses produced by the ultraconservative Christian Right in Italy.

## Narratives and discourses

Among the above-mentioned groups, we focused our analysis<sup>1</sup> on ProVita & Famiglia (PV&F) because of its pivotal role in organizing World Congress of Families XIII in Verona. Moreover, PV&F is one of the ultraconservative movements that has explicitly demonstrated a political alliance with radical-right parties. In fact, at WCF XIII, the first Conte cabinet, which at the time was composed of the League and the Five Stars Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle), officially endorsed the event through the participation of multiple members of the Italian government as speakers at the conference, including Matteo Salvini (Minister of Internal Affairs), Lorenzo Fontana (Minister for the Family and Disabilities), and Simone Pillon (Senator of the Italian Republic). We should remember that PV&F presents several ideological similarities with radical right-wing parties, including a nativist core ideology. In fact, it is not unusual to find PV&F's content on social media (PV&F 2018a), where the ultraconservative movement seeks to justify the contradictions that characterize its so-called *Christian* ideological roots and its refusal to host refugees. For instance, in 2018, PV&F claimed that there was a common misunderstanding of the following biblical verse (Matthew 25:35): "For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home". According to PV&F, "the guest is not an immigrant, because the guest eats, greets and leaves, the immigrant remains for life. Indeed, the traditional interpretation of this work of mercy is not *welcoming refugees* but *hosting pilgrims*" (PV&F 2018a). In this sense, both radical right-wing and ultraconservative movements share a xenophobic political agenda. The goal of this section is to reveal the religious narratives and discourses produced by PV&F that are intercepted and internalized by radical right-wing parties. To achieve this, for the period 2018–2021, we analyzed 33 petitions that are freely available on PV&F's website.

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1 For this chapter, we employed a critical discourse analysis to understand the ideas, values, and legitimization strategies that PV&F has used when addressing the religious sphere—an approach developed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) and Van Leeuwen (2007).

The idealization of the *traditional family* is the first core narrative that ultra-conservative movements employ when addressing messages on religious matters. This narrative reinforces the institutionalization of the archetypal family by supporting the idea that “the family is the cornerstone of the state” (PV&F 2021a). In its essence, the traditional family is represented as a married couple (a husband and a wife) who live with their biological children. The husband is recognized as the head of the family who sustains economically all its members. In exchange for this, the other components of the household owe him obedience and care (Fineman 1995). Another way that these actors reinforce this narrative is by associating the traditional family with the *natural family*, claiming the “right of children to grow up with a mum and dad” (PV&F 2021b).

The *condemnation of abortion* is another strong narrative. In fact, the pro-life discourses often attribute a social value to reproduction within communities and condemn abortive practices regardless of any pregnancy’s circumstances (Avanza 2020), describing abortion as “a death sentence before being born” (PV&F 2018b). Nevertheless, our analysis shows that this topic has been proposed in alternative ways. For instance, there are discourses that insinuate the danger of abortion practices for women’s health both physically and psychologically. As such, even though contributions from feminist political theory have long established abortion as a woman’s human right (Ballantyne 2021), the narration provided by actors linked to the ultraconservative Christian Right is meant to shift the critique of abortion from an ultraconservative value-based argument (*save the life of the fetus*) to a matter of women’s health care (*save the woman’s life*). To some extent, this discourse serves as a way to *intercept* the feminist audience (as they both argue in defense of women’s interests).

The *antagonization of LGBTIQ+ people’s rights* is the third main narrative that characterizes PV&F. In the period observed, the most frequently occurring discourse linked to this narrative was related to the critique of the Zan Bill. The Zan Bill was a bill that contained a set of articles punishing language and deeds that discriminate against people for their sexual orientation, gender, or gender identity. As such, ultra-conservative and radical-right circles waged a strong opposition to the law, defining it as dangerous for democracy and freedom. For this reason, it has often been defined as a “gag law”, meaning that all believers “risk prison and rainbow re-education” (PV&F 2021b). Another major discourse that reinforces the antagonization of LGBTIQ+ minorities is defending childhood from the threat of gender theory/ideology. In fact, one of the most common discourses employed by the analyzed actor was fighting “homosexual” lobbies who want “to indoctrinate our children” (PV&F 2020). As such, PV&F de-



velops discourses that, on the one hand, encourage the traditional framing of gender relations that evoke the complementary and *natural* roles of men and women, while, on the other, antagonizing all those political actors that disseminate gender theory and “confuse children’s minds by spreading controversial ideologies” (PV&F 2020) (Gusmeroli and Trappolin 2021).

Finally, we observed how, alongside the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, PV&F has proposed discourses that encourage an increasing *skepticism toward science* and even—albeit less explicitly—anti-vax discourses. For instance, PV&F has delivered ethical considerations on how COVID-19 vaccines have been produced by pharmaceutical companies. In fact, the critique mostly focused on “the production and exploitation of cell lines from aborted babies for drug development purposes” and “experimentation on human embryos” (PV&F 2021c).

Given these findings, we should remember that the discourses framed by this actor are not usually clear-cut messages that belong to one or another narrative. Rather, they may cut across more than one narrative in order to reinforce and legitimize ultraconservative religious values. In fact, discourses such as the promotion of the traditional family and the condemnation of abortion have usually been employed to encourage conservative models of gender roles, with women subordinated to and dependent on men (Braghiroli and Sandri 2014). Similarly, the threat of gender theory does not exclusively stigmatize LGBTIQA+ communities, but it is also employed as a grand discourse that cuts across narratives such as “the moral value of maternity and the protection of human life” (Gusmeroli and Trappolin 2021, 518). Similarly, the rising skepticism toward science echoes previous narratives such as the condemnation of abortion.

All in all, these results are in line with recent literature showing that the religious arguments employed by ultraconservative movements are generally used “to oppose liberalism, feminism, gender equality, and individual human rights” (Stoeckl 2020, 223).

## Conclusion

To sum up, the real strength of the Italian ultraconservative movements lies in their influence outside—and within—the Italian political offices. First, the galaxy of the Christian Right mostly conducts its political networking within the right-wing political sphere. In fact, it is among the radical right, in par-

ticular, that the ultraconservative movements find their most suited allies. For instance, these movements have managed to elect some of their exponents to the ranks of radical-right parties, such as Simone Pillon, who was elected in 2018 as an MP of the League; while at the general elections of 2022, a large part of candidates from Brothers of Italy had subscribed the pro-life and pro-family Manifesto promoted by the anti-gender movement. To this end, the radical-right parties, such as the League and Brothers of Italy, intercept and internalize the requests of the Christian Right, *normalizing* their religious/moral discourses, such as the dictatorship of political correctness, the threat of gender theory, and the loss of Italian identity.

Second, alongside this ideological homogeneity on religious matters between the Christian Right and the right-wing coalition (led by Matteo Salvini), the Parliament has witnessed a series of political debates that have wrecked, or jeopardized, many progressive battles. For instance, in 2016, the Cirinnà Bill legalized civil unions for same-sex couples, but, following an intense political debate that ended with a compromise between the center right and center left, it did not introduce the recognition of stepchild adoption for same-sex couples. In 2021, thanks to a secret ballot (strongly demanded by the right-wing coalition), further examination of the Zan Bill was stopped by the Senate. More recently the League has proposed a new bill to toughen the (already existing) penalties for surrogate motherhood. Following the example of European radical-right parties' *friends*, such as Law and Justice in Poland and Fidesz in Hungary, and with the technical and juridical support of Italian ultraconservative Catholic entrepreneurs, these Italian radical-right parties could propose restrictive policies on crucial issues such as LGBTIQ+ rights and abortion.

Certainly, the Italian Christian Right has not managed to come together in a joint political party in order to gain access to the Italian Parliament and explicitly enforce its ideology. Nevertheless, in a more hidden way, it remains one of the most powerful Italian lobbies, capable of influencing parliamentary legislation and spreading its political agenda within both public opinion and the mainstream media. To conclude, it is important to note the comfortable position of these movements with respect to the Vatican, which is one of the main reasons for their public visibility. Contrary to traditionalist movements (which are critical of the Second Vatican Council), these contentious but mainstream new Catholic movements recognize the authority of the Vatican and of Pope Francis, whom they are very careful to not openly criticize. This is probably the reason why, albeit with underlying tensions, the Vatican is very comfortable with having an *army of crusaders* at war against *gender ideology* and *LGB-*

TIQA+ lobbies, just as the new Catholic movements are comfortable with having such a powerful institution that gives them *carte blanche* by not hindering their projects—and even supporting them.

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