

Evaluation of Antigone: **Protecting democracy through legal support and advocacy**

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Executive summary

Italy is undergoing a phase of early but intensifying democratic backsliding marked by executive aggrandisement, repressive legislation, and the erosion of institutional checks and balances. With general elections approaching in 2027, there is a narrow but critical window to reaffirm rule-of-law constraints, strengthen independent oversight, and protect civic and political space – helping to halt further democratic erosion irrespective of electoral outcomes.

Associazione Antigone Onlus ('Antigone'), one of Italy's leading civil society organisations working on human rights, has proposed a high-impact, two-year initiative to counter this trend of democratic backsliding through legal infrastructure, strategic litigation, and coordinated advocacy.

The initiative centres on building sustainable infrastructure to resist authoritarian advances and protect crucial democratic guardrails: a permanent Constitutional Defence Hub, a public legal cases database, and a structured programme of litigation, advocacy, and legal mobilisation. With these tools, Antigone will challenge executive overreach and defend constitutional checks and balances in national and international courts as well as in the public sphere. It will also equip other legal actors and members of civil society with the resources to do the same – raising the legal and political costs of further authoritarian entrenchment.

Antigone's track record combines high-level legal expertise with an ability to drive civic mobilisation and shift public discourse, demonstrating the viability of this approach. The organisation has led landmark cases before Italy's Constitutional Court and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), contributed to the creation of new legal standards, mobilised large-scale public opposition to repressive legislation, and its technical submissions have shaped national parliamentary debates and European oversight processes.

Antigone is seeking €350,000 to support the implementation of a comprehensive legal and advocacy campaign ahead of Italy's forthcoming elections. This is a rare democratic opening and opportunity to intervene at a time when democratic safeguards are being tested but have not been dismantled.

Investing now in Antigone's work means securing enforceable legal safeguards, empowering institutional resistance, and defending civic space in a core European Union (EU) democracy; further erosion would undermine the bloc's institutional credibility and send ripple effects across Europe and beyond.



ANTIGONE

What problem does this initiative address?

Italy is experiencing early-stage democratic backsliding marked by executive aggrandisement, shrinking civic space, and escalating restrictions on fundamental rights. Central threats include the 2025 *Decreto Sicurezza* (Security Decree) and its subsequent extensions, which criminalise non-violent protest and expand coercive state powers; the proposed reform, the *Premierato* Bill, which would concentrate executive authority and weaken parliamentary checks; and judicial reforms that risk undermining prosecutorial independence and the autonomy of the judiciary.

This moment matters because democratic erosion in Italy is still reversible: courts are still independent, civil society is mobilised, and strategically important legal challenges are emerging ahead of the 2027 general elections, creating a narrow but real window for targeted legal action and advocacy to halt further decline and set the conditions for democratic recovery.

Italy's trajectory is also internationally consequential. As a G7 country, founding EU and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member, and key actor in Mediterranean governance, it plays a central role in shaping European and transatlantic norms. Its current leadership is deeply embedded in transnational illiberal networks, acting as a bridge between mainstream conservative actors and more openly authoritarian forces. Democratic backsliding in Italy therefore risks not only weakening domestic safeguards but also normalising illiberal governance models within core democratic alliances.

Background on Antigone

Associazione Antigone Onlus ('Antigone') is an Italian civil society organisation with over three decades of experience defending human rights and constitutional democracy.

Founded in 1991 in Rome, Antigone has become one of Italy's most credible and recognised actors working at the intersection of criminal justice reform and democratic defence. It operates nationally through a network of regional branches and internationally through formal collaborations with European and global human rights organisations and mechanisms.¹

Antigone's strategic focus and institutional credibility make it a strong fit for supporting litigation and advocacy-based efforts to defend democracy in Italy. Its longstanding mandate to monitor detention conditions, promote legal reforms, and protect civil liberties situates it squarely at the centre of current struggles against authoritarian legal trends.

Mission, history, and focus areas

Antigone's core mission is to protect human dignity and uphold constitutional guarantees. It seeks to promote a legal and political culture rooted in human rights, accountability, and the rule of law. It has led efforts to expose human rights violations, counter punitive penal policies, and resist measures that normalise repression.

The organisation has developed a distinctive operating model that combines legal research, strategic litigation, policy advocacy, and public mobilisation. Its work includes: systematic prison monitoring through its longstanding Prison Observatory; the publication of annual and thematic reports on detention conditions, juvenile justice, and administrative detention; and the operation of legal help desks that provide direct assistance to people deprived of liberty.

Antigone routinely brings or supports cases before domestic courts and international human rights bodies, submits *amicus curiae* interventions, and contributes expert legal analysis to parliamentary hearings and international oversight mechanisms. In parallel, it coordinates national advocacy campaigns, builds coalitions with other civil society organisations and legal professionals, and translates complex legal findings into accessible public communication to shape media narratives and public debate.

In the current political context, Antigone plays a central role in shaping civic opposition to executive aggrandisement as a leading actor in *No DDL Sicurezza* ['Network Against the

Security Decree’]. This network opposes the 2025 Security Decree and its expansions and brings together civil society organisations, academics, and activists to challenge repressive legislation.

Staff and leadership expertise

Antigone is staffed by a multi-disciplinary team of legal experts, policy advocates, researchers, and communications professionals. The organisation’s leadership includes some of Italy’s foremost legal scholars and human rights defenders. Its president, Dr Patrizio Gonnella, is a professor of philosophy of law. A long-time human rights advocate, he has experience advising the Council of Europe on detention monitoring and the prevention of torture, as well as other international organisations on constitutional affairs, including the Organization of Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the EU.

Antigone has eleven full-time staff and is supported by a wide network of approximately 300 volunteers – mainly criminal defence lawyers and academics – who contribute to monitoring, legal support, and public engagement.

Networks, coalitions, and partnerships

Antigone is deeply embedded in European and international human rights networks. It is a member of:

- the Italian Coalition for Civil Liberties and Rights (CILD), which it co-founded and chaired for the first five years²
- the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)³
- the Legal Experts Advisory Panel (LEAP), coordinated by Fair Trials⁴
- the Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties)⁵
- the European Prison Observatory, which it founded and coordinates⁶
- the NGO Panel on Children Deprived of Liberty.⁷

Antigone's institutional credibility is underscored by its ongoing authorisation by the Italian Ministry of Justice to conduct independent monitoring of Italian prisons and detention centres (since 1998), and its regular engagement with high-level political institutions, including the Italian Presidency of the Republic.⁸ Additionally, it consistently participates in European and UN accountability ecosystems.

At the European level, Antigone engages in rule-of-law oversight and reporting processes. It was consulted in relation to the European Commission (EC)'s Rule of Law reporting cycle and contributed to structured civil society rule-of-law reporting via Liberties as well as to the Council of Europe's human rights programming on the deprivation of liberty.⁹

At the UN, it is a civil society contributor to the Universal Periodic Review of Italy (as an integral part of CILD)¹⁰ and to the work of the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture.¹¹ It also provides input to UN treaty-body processes, including the Committee Against Torture and, most recently, the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Why is donor funding needed?

Antigone aims to safeguard constitutional democracy in Italy by mounting a full and coordinated legal and advocacy campaign against legislative advances that will weaken constitutional checks and balances, including the Security Decree and its expansions.

With donor support, Antigone will implement a two-year project ahead of the 2027 general elections that combines immediate action with lasting institutional resilience-building. This means shifting from reactive campaigning to sustained legal and advocacy capacity, supported by durable infrastructure and practical resources for democratic defence. Importantly, Antigone has the capacity to monitor the evolving legal and political landscape to identify emerging threats early and adapt its litigation and advocacy strategy accordingly.

Goals of Antigone's action

Over the next 24 months, Antigone will establish a sustained structure to support and pursue litigation and coordinate advocacy to defend Italy's democratic foundations. Donor funding will guarantee a clearly defined package of legal and advocacy work designed to generate enforceable constraints on rights-restricting measures and to strengthen rule of law standards.

First, Antigone will operationalise a permanent Constitutional Defence Hub – a standing team of legal experts able to respond quickly to new legislative threats, coordinate case strategy, and provide the technical backbone for constitutional challenges.

This hub will not only support litigation; it will also systematise the legal work of Antigone and its allied actors through a public database of legal cases, assembling key documents (such as case materials, legal analyses, constitutional arguments, and relevant jurisprudence) to be used by lawyers, activists, and partner organisations in parallel cases. This will also inform direct legal support to individuals/groups facing criminalisation as a result of engaging in peaceful protest.

Second, funding will directly resource strategic litigation and legal interventions, including the launch and support of at least three carefully selected constitutional or strategic cases, complemented where relevant by *amicus* interventions and expert opinions. The intent is to prioritise cases with high precedent potential – those capable of constraining problematic provisions and raising the legal and political cost of executive overreach.

Alongside this, Antigone will run a programme of legal mobilisation and capacity-building, delivering six targeted workshops to equip legal professionals and civil society actors with practical tools to resist repressive applications of current and new laws and to strengthen the pipeline of future cases.

Furthermore, funding will sustain an integrated advocacy and communications track that translates legal work into institutional pressure and public momentum. Antigone will produce and disseminate legal and policy briefs to national and European stakeholders, convene high-level engagements with policymakers and political institutions, expand alliances with civil society and academic partners, and organise public mobilisation against authoritarian advances. This will be

enhanced by traditional media outreach and multi-platform communication campaigns.

Together, these activities ensure donor support funds not just legal action in isolation, but a full pathway that enhances its impact and public salience.

Antigone's track record

Antigone is on the frontlines of resistance to executive overreach and the securitisation of the public sphere in Italy. It has, in response to the Security Decree, engaged in knowledge creation, advocacy, and mobilisation through the publication of legal and technical documents (including work connected to an OSCE opinion process), participation in parliamentary hearings, and a communication effort to disseminate critiques to policymakers and the public.

Additionally, it helped to organise civic opposition through the *No DDL Sicurezza* network (launched in November 2024), including a demonstration in Rome with 100,000 participants, supported by sustained media outreach and the publication of an accessible book-length intervention on the decree's implications for protest rights.

Beyond time-bound campaigns, Antigone has sustained rights monitoring and protection work over many years. Its Prison Observatory conducts around 100 visits per year to adult and juvenile detention facilities. Its extensive network is able to generate casework, evidence, and institutional recommendations that feed into litigation and policy advocacy. In this regard, it has submitted formal interventions in Constitutional Court proceedings, including a landmark case in which the Constitutional Court affirmed the rights of incarcerated people to privacy.

Furthermore, it has demonstrated the ability to escalate cases to the ECtHR, with a landmark victory that contributed to reforms including the adoption of Law No. 110/2017. This introduced torture offences into the Italian legislative framework and illustrates how strategic escalation to Strasbourg can translate into binding pressure for institutional change.

ANTIGONE

Theory of change

Donors support Antigone



Antigone sets sustainable infrastructure to identify emerging threats, selects high-leverage legal pathways and engages in multi-layer advocacy



Amicus briefs and legal interventions; legal and policy briefs; practitioner training; popular mobilisation; coalition work; media outreach



Favourable court rulings, enhanced institutional scrutiny, and increase in public awareness and push-back



Civic space defended; democratic norms and safeguards reinforced

Theory of change

Donor support to Antigone enables the establishment of sustainable legal and advocacy infrastructure designed to detect and respond to emerging threats to constitutional democracy in Italy.

This model is deliberately built around durable infrastructure: a permanent Constitutional Defence Hub concentrates

expertise and coordinates action while an accessible database of legal cases systematises arguments and evidence.

With this infrastructure in place, Antigone produces a range of outputs that include *amicus* briefs, strategic legal interventions, legal and policy briefs, practitioner training, coalition-building, and media outreach. These outputs serve to challenge rights-restricting measures, inform key stakeholders, and build the capacities of legal and civil society actors. They also contribute to shaping pro-democracy narratives and anchoring them within broader public debate.

In turn, these outputs lead to measurable outcomes: favourable court rulings, greater institutional scrutiny, and increased public awareness and resistance to authoritarian advances. Even when legal cases do not result in immediate victories, they help standardise democratic contestation and create legal reference points for future action. The longer-term impact is the defence and reinforcement of democratic civic space, norms, and standards – in Italy and beyond.

Expected outcomes

Expected outcomes flow from how legal action and advocacy reinforce each other. Litigation and legal interventions can produce rulings that constrain rights-restricting provisions and establish precedents. Alongside this, coordinated advocacy increases the political, administrative, and reputational costs of executive overreach: it amplifies legal critiques into public debate, strengthens coalition resistance, and raises the likelihood that institutions respond, comply, or refrain from further escalation. Over time, this two-pronged approach effectively defends civic space and reinforces accountability norms, embedding longer-term democratic resilience.

This theory of change assumes that courts retain the independence to check executive overreach, that litigation can deter or constrain even when outcomes are partial or delayed, and that coalitions and public communication can translate legal work into sustained institutional pressure. In Italy, these channels remain open but they are narrowing, making coordinated action both viable and urgent.

A two-year project is the right horizon to build lasting legal capacity, develop and pursue high-impact cases, and sustain

advocacy through key institutional and political moments leading into the 2027 election cycle. In this context, Antigone's integrated legal-plus-advocacy model offers a practical way to raise the costs of democratic erosion and strengthen durable defences for the period ahead.

Funding gap and use of funds

Antigone will implement a 24-month programme with a total budget of €350,000, designed to provide sufficient continuity and delivery capacity. Funding will guarantee Antigone's ability to maintain stable operational capacity while significantly increasing the intensity and coordination of strategic litigation and advocacy. Without dedicated donor support at this level, Antigone would be forced to rely on fragmented, short-term project funding, limiting its ability to select, escalate, and follow through on high-impact legal cases, and to pair them with sustained advocacy and mobilisation.

The allocation of funds prioritises direct delivery. The largest share is dedicated to operational and knowledge-building activities (€170,000) that directly generate outputs and outcomes.

This includes:

- €70,000 allocated to strategic litigation and legal costs – creating and sustaining the Constitutional Defence Hub, bringing cases before national and international courts, and providing emergency legal assistance
- €45,000 for public communication and mobilisation – to support media outreach, multi-platform campaigns, and public events that amplify legal action and raise its political and reputational impact
- €20,000 to finance the legal cases database and publications
- €20,000 for international advocacy

- €15,000 for training and coordination of territorial legal and activist networks.

A further €150,000 is dedicated to human resources, ensuring a stable team across the full project period. This includes a senior project coordinator and policy analyst, legal researchers and managers for the Constitutional Defence Hub, a communications and digital campaigning lead, and financial and administrative support. Finally, the budget includes €30,000 for overhead, general administrative costs.

Cost-efficiency

Antigone's model maximises leverage by integrating legal action with advocacy. Legal action can generate outsized returns when it produces precedents and deterrence effects or enforceable constraints on state power. Even partial legal successes can protect large numbers of rights-holders and reduce the long-term cost of defending civic space through repeated reactive interventions. The same is true for well-timed legal interventions that elevate an issue to constitutional review or European scrutiny.

By coupling legal action with coordinated advocacy and public communication and mobilisation, Antigone increases the likelihood that legal pressure will lead to real-world restraint through public salience, coalition reinforcement, and sustained follow-through with institutions.

Additionally, Antigone will build reusable and sustainable infrastructure – a standing legal hub, shared legal resources, and trained networks. These investments compound: once built, they reduce the marginal costs of future cases, improve case selection and escalation, shorten response times to emerging threats, and strengthen the broader pro-democracy ecosystem's ability to act even beyond Antigone's direct involvement.

Risks and mitigation

Antigone operates in a politically sensitive environment, and this initiative entails several political, legal, and operational risks that have been identified and factored into its design.

Political and legal risks include backlash from government actors in response to sustained legal challenges and public advocacy. This may take the form of rhetorical attacks, the delegitimisation of civil society actors, or attempts to restrict Antigone's activities. There is also a risk of intimidation or threats directed at senior leadership, lawyers, or partner organisations involved in challenging the Security Decree and related measures.

Strategic risks relate to the inherent uncertainty of litigation outcomes and timelines. Adverse rulings, procedural delays, or partial victories could limit immediate legal impact. There is also a risk that legal victories will not be implemented in practice if they are not paired with sustained advocacy and monitoring.

Mitigation measures are embedded in the project's two-pronged design. Litigation is pursued alongside advocacy, coalition-building, and public communication to avoid over-reliance on single cases or institutions. Alliances with national and international partners distribute visibility and risk, reducing exposure to targeted pressure. Stable staffing over 24 months enables workload management and continuity, and flexibility within the budget allows resources to be reallocated if legal or security needs escalate.

Antigone will monitor risks by continuously tracking indicators, such as for institutional access, authorisation renewals, incidents of harassment or intimidation, media attacks, and legal developments. Escalation protocols and adaptive planning will be used to adjust tactics if backlash or harm risks increase, ensuring the initiative remains effective while safeguarding staff, partners, and beneficiaries.

Follow-up and learning plans

Power for Democracies is committed to ensuring that the resources allocated as a result of our recommendations are used effectively.

Antigone will closely monitor implementation activities and track progress against key performance indicators linked to this initiative. These will include the following:

Litigation and legal outcomes

- Number of new strategic cases initiated in response to authoritarian legislation or rights-restricting measures
- Number and type of precedent-setting rulings achieved in domestic or European court
- Number of legal submissions or amicus interventions in national or international fora

Advocacy and outreach

- Number and reach of coordinated communication campaigns linked to legal interventions
- Number of high-level advocacy engagements and civil society coalitions supported nationally and internationally
- Number of legal workshops and training sessions conducted for legal practitioners, civil society organisations, and activists

Institutional learning and impact

- Public launch of the legal cases database
- Systematisation of litigation strategy and dissemination of legal tools to partners and the public

Regular donor updates that track progress against these outputs will be provided, and Power for Democracies will collaborate with Antigone where possible to design a rigorous

evaluation approach to assess medium- and long-term outcomes.

Conclusion and recommendation

Antigone stands at the frontline of defence of constitutional democracy in Italy at a moment of intensifying threat. With unmatched legal expertise, deep institutional networks, and a proven capacity to translate litigation into systemic impact, it is one of the few actors positioned to constrain authoritarian advances through credible, coordinated action. The urgency is clear: the run-up to the 2027 elections is a critical period in which either democratic safeguards are reinforced or repression is normalised.

Failing to resource this initiative would mean forfeiting a rare and time-sensitive opportunity to push back against democratic erosion in a G7 democracy. We therefore recommend a full funding allocation of €350,000 over 24 months – a high-leverage investment in one of the most effective tactics for democratic defence in Europe.

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