

# ITALY: The state of **Italy's democracy**

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# Why Italy matters now

Recent political shifts are testing the strength of democratic safeguards in Italy. Since 2022, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's coalition, led by her *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy) party, initiated reforms that concentrate executive power, weaken judicial independence, and erode core liberal-democratic norms. Although electoral integrity remains intact, key indicators reveal democratic strain. In 2024, Italy registered one of the steepest declines among advanced democracies on the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Liberal Democracy Index (LDI). Civicus downgraded Italy's civic space from narrowed to obstructed in 2025.

These developments have implications beyond Italy's borders. As a G7 member and key actor in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU), where Meloni has emerged as a significant powerbroker and valued interlocutor for US President Donald Trump, Italy's democratic backsliding risks amplifying illiberal dynamics across Europe and the transatlantic sphere.

Nonetheless, Italian institutions, including its courts, and civil society retain meaningful resilience. With an election expected in late 2027, there is a timely opportunity for targeted, high-impact pro-democracy support – particularly efforts that bolster legal action and advocacy aimed at limiting the impacts of legislative initiatives which seek to limit fundamental rights and weaken checks and balances.

# Democracy dashboard

Sources: V-Dem; Freedom House; Civicus; IMF; World Justice Project; RSF; World Bank

Head of government:  
**Giorgia Meloni**  
(2022– )

Regime type:  
**Liberal democracy**

Freedom score:  
**89 / 100 –**  
**Free**

Quality of civic space:  
**60 / 100 –**  
**Obstructed**

Rule of Law Index:  
**34 / 143**

Press freedom ranking:  
**49 / 180**

Accountability ranking:  
**75.5 / 100**

GDP:  
**€2.2 trillion**

## A note on our sources

Our findings are based on desk research, literature reviews, and interviews with subject matter experts. Our assessments are based on indices from democracy observers of record:

- Varieties for Democracy (V-Dem): the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) ranging from 0 (least democratic) to 1 (most democratic), and other indices.
- Reporters Without Borders (RSF): the World Press Freedom Index; the World Justice Project (WJP): the Rule of Law Index; and the World Bank: the Worldwide Governance Indicators.
- We have also reviewed and cite the relevant scores and rankings from Freedom House, Civicus, and other organisations concerned with the monitoring of different aspects of democracy.
- We have developed our own matrices for prioritisation of (1) countries; (2) democracy tactics within those countries; and (3) civil society organisations' effectiveness.

# Need to know

- **Early-stage democratic decline:** Italy remains a liberal democracy with competitive elections and an active civil society. But between 2022 and 2025, major democracy watchdogs have reported mounting pressure on the rule of law, civil liberties, and media freedom, alongside a pattern of growing executive aggrandisement.
- **Shrinking civic space and securitisation:** The shrinking of civic space under Meloni builds on – and significantly exacerbates – pre-existing trends. The 2025 Decreto Sicurezza (Security Decree) sharpens this trajectory by criminalising forms of non-violent protest and expanding police and intelligence powers; additional measures announced in early 2026 would further narrow the exercise of fundamental rights, signalling an intensifying and more entrenched law-and-order approach to public order.
- **Executive aggrandisement and institutional overhaul:** Democracy observers warn that the government's Premierato Bill reflects a clear intention to overhaul Italy's constitutional architecture by concentrating power in the office of the Prime Minister. Although the reform's final design remains under deliberation and is unlikely to be completed during this legislature, it nonetheless signals a centralisation of executive power that risks weakening checks and balances and diminishing democratic representation.
- **Global impact and authoritarian diffusion:** As a G7 power and founding member of the EU and NATO, Italy's democratic erosion has global implications. The current government's alignment with global authoritarian leaders contributes to the normalisation and entrenchment of illiberal tactics within core democratic institutions and provides a model and source of inspiration for far-right populists and authoritarian actors worldwide.
- **Scope for democratic resistance:** Italy retains significant capacity for democratic pushback. The

judiciary continues to assert its independence in the face of political pressure; civil society remains mobilised, and the media landscape, though strained, is pluralistic. In addition, binding European legal and financial frameworks provide concrete channels for institutional oversight to counter early-stage democratic backsliding.

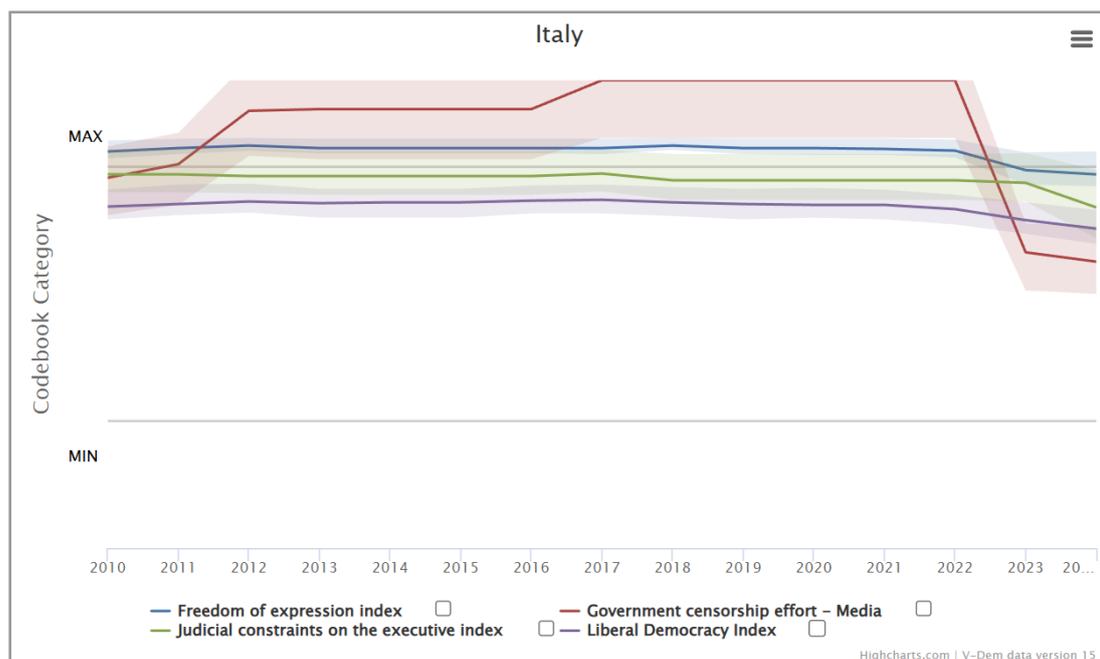
## Democracy snapshot

Italy is a parliamentary republic and its political system is based on the 1948 Constitution, deliberately designed to prevent the resurgence of fascism. The Constitution is enforced by the Constitutional Court, whose judges have historically played an assertive role in defending civil liberties and upholding checks on political power<sup>1</sup>.

### Democracy trajectory

Italy shows several warning signs of democratic backsliding. From 2023 to 2024, the country registered one of the steepest declines among advanced democracies on the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Liberal Democracy Index (from 0.76 in 2023 to 0.70 in 2024) and was placed on its ‘potential autocratisers’ watchlist<sup>2</sup>. In 2025, Civicus downgraded Italy’s civic space from ‘narrowed’ to ‘obstructed.’ This downward trajectory is driven primarily by erosions in media freedom, constraints on freedom of expression, and weakened judicial oversight of the executive, as illustrated in the graph using V-Dem data below.

## Trends in democratic indicators and media censorship in Italy (2010–2024)



Source: V-dem graphing tools, February 2025.

Government instability has been a persistent feature of Italy’s post-war history: it has averaged one government every 13 months since World War II<sup>3</sup>. In the most recent general election, held on 25 September 2022, Giorgia Meloni, head of *Fratelli d’Italia*, became Prime Minister. Her government is the thirteenth since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In a country where electoral coalitions are the norm, she governs in alliance with the far-right *Lega Nord* (Northern League), led by Matteo Salvini, and the centre-right *Forza Italia* (Forward Italy), led by Antonio Tajani.

## Post-fascist origins

*Fratelli d'Italia* seeks to distance itself from its post-fascist origins<sup>a</sup> – Meloni has asserted that the party has ‘consigned fascism to history’ and accepts Italy’s republican constitutional framework. Yet its organisational genealogy traces back to the neo-fascist *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI) (Italian Social Movement), founded in 1946 by former fascist officials, and its successor, the *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN) (National Alliance), whose cadres formed the basis of *Fratelli d'Italia* in 2012. As such, the party is often characterised as a radical right party with a post-fascist lineage, despite efforts to mainstream its image and programme<sup>4</sup>.

## Meloni’s reform agenda

Since taking office, Meloni has pursued an agenda that blends social conservatism with centralising ambitions.

Her *Premierato* bill proposes a constitutional reform that would result in the direct election of the Prime Minister for five years and guarantee a parliamentary majority for the winning party that would most likely not reflect the popular vote, leaving the Prime Minister with minimal effective checks on power from within the political system. In the short term, this would effectively lock in her governing bloc’s control of parliament and further concentrate executive power in the Prime Minister’s office.

This move has been widely criticised for its potential to delegitimise the Parliament, relegating it to a secondary role, and to weaken checks and balances. The bill cleared an initial Senate reading in June 2024, but it faces a lengthy journey to full approval<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>a</sup> In fact, formal repudiation of fascism coexists with practical continuities: the party retains the MSI’s tricolour flame in its logo, it has campaigned under the slogan ‘Dio, patria, famiglia’ (‘God, homeland, family’) – a motto used by Mussolini’s fascist regime – and there is notable stability in party personnel. These choices signal enduring ideological and institutional links that sit uneasily with liberal-democratic norms, particularly in its ambivalent treatment of anti-fascism and the legacy of the war-time resistance movement<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, *Fratelli d'Italia*’s electoral ascent has emboldened far-right and nationalist factions<sup>3</sup>, contributing to increasingly polarised rhetoric in both the digital and physical public spheres.

In October 2025, the Senate approved another constitutional reform proposal from Meloni's government on justice reform. The so-called Nordio reform, named after the current Minister of Justice, would reshape judicial governance and career mobility while creating a new disciplinary body. Having fallen short of the two-thirds majority the reform, at the time of writing, was scheduled for a referendum on 22-23 March 2026. While the changes may seem procedural, critics argue they risk weakening judicial independence by fragmenting the judiciary's self-governing bodies, increasing its exposure to executive influence, and diluting the institutional cohesion that has historically safeguarded liberal democracy in Italy<sup>6</sup>.

Additionally, the Meloni government has been criticised for its excessive use of emergency law decrees, as highlighted in the European Commission's 2024 Italy Rule of Law Report<sup>7</sup>. Since taking office, the executive has regularly bypassed ordinary legislative channels, weakening parliamentary oversight; this trend reflects a broader shift toward executive dominance.

Meloni's majority is also, as of January 2026, moving to rewrite Italy's national electoral law, the *Rosatellum*<sup>8</sup>, ahead of the 2027 general election. While framed as a reform to enhance 'governability', the central proposal under discussion is the introduction of a majority bonus for the most voted party – a change that could significantly distort proportional representation and entrench executive power.

## **Transnational networks countering democracy**

Meloni and *Fratelli d'Italia* are embedded in a wider transnational ecosystem of authoritarian and far-right actors, both in Europe and across the Atlantic. Meloni frequently appears alongside figures such as Viktor Orbán, Marine Le Pen, Santiago Abascal, Donald Trump, and Javier Milei at rallies and summits that promote a shared agenda of national sovereignty, hostility to so-called 'wokeness', and the defence of Christian civilisation<sup>9</sup>.

Meloni plays a strategically important role within this network for her ability to present herself as a pragmatic conservative and more 'acceptable' face of this illiberal camp within EU institutions, all the while strengthening her ties with leaders who openly contest liberal-democratic norms. This positioning

contributes to a broader shift in the EU and international order towards less democratic governance models<sup>10</sup>.

The NGO Liberties, in its most recent Rule of Law Report<sup>11</sup>, classified Italy among the EU ‘dismantlers’ – countries that systematically undermine rule-of-law safeguards – citing concerns related to media freedom, judicial reforms, and checks and balances. Because the EU depends on mutual trust among member states, rule-of-law backsliding has wide spillovers. It weakens cross-border cooperation, lowers shared democratic standards, politicises enforcement, fuels veto bargaining, and undermines the EU’s credibility as a promoter of democracy abroad.

Meloni's popularity, however, remains strong. Three years into her tenure, opinion polls place her approval rating at around 42 per cent<sup>12</sup>. Although economic growth has been sluggish, her government is widely credited with delivering fiscal stability. Analysts note, however, that this has come at the cost of more ambitious structural reforms needed to stimulate long-term growth<sup>13</sup>. Meloni has also consolidated her base by emphasising national identity, traditional values, and law-and-order messaging.

## Threats to democracy

Italy’s democratic resilience is increasingly under strain, as recent political developments point to a pattern of institutional concentration, constraints on fundamental rights, and pressure on independent oversight.

The main threats to Italy’s democracy are: (1) executive aggrandisement; (2) restrictions on civic space; (3) attacks on media freedom; (4) erosion of human rights; and (5) historic revisionism. Together these threats risk weakening the checks, rights, and pluralism that underpin constitutional democracy.

## Executive aggrandisement

The Meloni government has advanced a package of institutional changes aimed at consolidating executive authority. Central to this is the proposed *Premierato* Bill, which would introduce the direct election of the Prime Minister, accompanied by a new electoral law that would guarantee a 55 per cent majority in Parliament to their party, regardless of vote share. This design would sideline parliament's oversight role and concentrate power in the executive to a greater degree than is usual in liberal democracies today.

Critics argue that the reform risks violating foundational democratic principles by enabling a coalition with a minority of votes to command a majority of seats, undermining electoral equality and popular sovereignty<sup>14</sup>. The bill is also viewed as an attempt to circumvent previous constitutional court rulings that declared similar electoral systems unconstitutional. Embedding such a system in the Constitution may amount to an 'unconstitutional constitutional amendment'<sup>15</sup>, a concept recognised in Italian constitutional jurisprudence when supreme democratic principles are compromised.

The Italian Association of Constitutionalists has also expressed concern about the government's overuse of emergency law-decrees and the implications for parliamentary sovereignty<sup>16</sup>. In just three years, Meloni's government has adopted 91 law-decrees<sup>17</sup> – a pace that significantly exceeds historical norms. These decrees are often followed by 'armour-plated' conversion laws (*leggi di conversione blindate*), which restrict parliamentary amendments and limit legislative scrutiny. Critics warn that this sustained reliance on emergency procedures erodes parliamentary sovereignty<sup>18</sup>.

Another facet of executive aggrandisement is Meloni's agenda of judicial reform. Her administration has advanced a legislative effort to reshape judicial governance, including a proposal to separate the career paths of judges and prosecutors.

The government argues the reform would curb factionalism and improve efficiency, while magistrates' associations and opposition parties warn that it would undermine judicial independence by increasing political influence over prosecutorial decisions. The National Association of Magistrates has warned that the legislation could allow

political interference in prosecutorial priorities, undermining judicial impartiality. These concerns have fuelled public mobilisation within the judicial sector since early 2025.

As the reform did not achieve the two-thirds parliamentary majority required for a constitutional change, it is now set to proceed to a national referendum in late March 2026. Meloni has been laying the groundwork for the referendum through a sustained public effort to delegitimise the judiciary, repeatedly accusing sections of it of political bias. In her 2026 New Year's address, she intensified these attacks, arguing that certain judicial decisions undermined the work of law enforcement and parliament and compromised public safety; she additionally insisted that judges should be held accountable for their decisions. Such rhetoric can have a chilling effect on judicial independence while also publicly delegitimising it.

What is more, the Meloni government abolished the crime of abuse of office and restricted the power of corruption investigators to use wiretaps. This significantly limits – or removes – core criminal and investigative tools available to prosecutors to detect and punish corruption. Multiple institutional observers have warned it risks creating de facto impunity and weakening democratic checks and balances<sup>19</sup>.

## **Restrictions of civic space**

In April 2025, the Meloni government adopted the emergency Law-Decree No. 48/2025 – *Decreto Sicurezza* (Security Decree) – which introduces 14 new criminal offences and nine aggravating circumstances in areas such as terrorism, organised crime, urban security, prison management, and support for law enforcement. The Security Decree sharply increases sanctions for non-violent protest, including road blockades, passive resistance, and stiffens penalties for riots in prisons and migrant-detention riots, as well as the occupation of homes and public spaces. It also criminalises begging, expands surveillance, and strengthens the power and legal protections of police, military, and intelligence services.

A proposed duty to cooperate with intelligence services, which was extended to universities and public media, was softened after the President of the Republic intervened<sup>20</sup>. Nonetheless,

critics argue that the decree remains disproportionately repressive and poses serious risks to fundamental rights. National and international oversight bodies, including Amnesty International<sup>21</sup>, Civic Space Watch<sup>22</sup>, Civicus<sup>23</sup>, UN special rapporteurs<sup>24</sup>, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)<sup>25</sup>, and the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights<sup>26</sup>, warn that the package constitutes the most serious attack on the freedom to protest in the history of the Italian Republic. It may also prove difficult to reconcile it with constitutional guarantees as well as the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights.

These concerns were echoed in the European Commission 2025 Rule of Law Report<sup>27</sup>. Domestically, a broad group of Italian constitutional scholars including former presidents and vice-presidents of the Constitutional Court condemned the decree as signalling an authoritarian and repressive turn, reflecting a broader strategy of elevating state authority and public order over fundamental rights<sup>28</sup>.

Even before the decree, social movements and individual activists were experiencing criminalisation and increased police repression, through the enactment of *fogli di via* (removal orders) and *Divieto di Accedere alle Manifestazioni Sportive* (DASPO) (Ban on Access to Sporting Events), as well as other administrative restrictions on protest activity. This has intensified since the decree's adoption. Youth-led climate justice movements and other activists have faced charges and received legal sanctions before mid-2025 that could result in effective prison sentences for organising and participating in peaceful protest, and labour unionists have been subjected to criminal proceedings for regular protest activity such as picketing, road blocks, and peaceful demonstrations. Front Line Defenders has additionally reported violations of protesters' fundamental rights, with prolonged detentions, denial of access to legal counsel, and instances of sexual harassment<sup>29</sup>.

At the time of writing, expansions to the Security Decree are being proposed, which would impose substantial financial guarantees on organisers of vaguely 'risky' demonstrations, sharply increase fines, introduce further migration restrictions, and create a 'national observatory on phenomena of islamisation.' *La Lega Nord* is also advocating for the deployment of armed forces in so-called 'sensitive areas', a

proposal which has generated tensions within the governing coalition over the appropriate role of the military in domestic public order<sup>30</sup>.

## Attacks on media freedom

Under Meloni's government, concerns about media freedom have increasingly centred on a combination of institutional influence and legal pressure. The public broadcaster RAI has undergone politicised restructuring, including the removal of journalists and the cancellation of critical programmes. At the same time, high-profile defamation proceedings (SLAPPs) – such as the criminal case involving author Roberto Saviano – alongside draft initiatives like *Disegno di legge* S. 466 (the 'Balboni Bill'), have fuelled fears that legal tools are being used to deter scrutiny and chill critical reporting<sup>31</sup>. Media watchdogs warn that these dynamics are encouraging self-censorship and have called for EU-aligned reforms to protect journalistic independence. Against this backdrop, the 2025 Media Pluralism Monitor classified Italy as medium-high-risk, pointing to vulnerabilities linked to direct government control and the leverage created by public funding<sup>32</sup>.

The recent Paragon Solutions spyware case<sup>33</sup> is a key episode in assessing freedom of expression and surveillance in Italy. In early 2025, the spyware company Paragon Solutions terminated its commercial relationship with Italy and blocked access to Graphite, a military-grade surveillance technology sold exclusively to governments, following allegations of misuse. According to *The Guardian*<sup>34</sup>, the decision came after Meta revealed that Paragon spyware had been used to target Italian citizens' WhatsApp accounts, including those of journalists and civil society actors.

While the government confirmed that seven Italian citizens were victims of a hacking attack carried out using Paragon spyware, it denied any involvement by national intelligence services. Nonetheless, the case raises serious concerns about government surveillance of journalists and activists and has been cited by the Civicus Monitor as a significant factor in downgrading Italy's civic space from 'narrowed' to 'obstructed' in 2025<sup>35</sup>.

## Attacks on human rights

Meloni, her party, and *Lega Nord* have repeatedly translated anti-immigrant and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric into policy proposals. On immigration, the government frames migrants as threats to Italy's cultural and ethnic homogeneity and has struck deals with third countries to transfer migrants out of Italy, with few human rights guarantees. On LGBTQ+ issues, Meloni has opposed same-sex marriage and the expansion of anti-discrimination protections. Her government rejected legislation that would classify violence against LGBTQ+ people as a hate crime and opposed legal recognition of same-sex adoption.

On women's rights, the executive's stance has been more mixed. In November 2025, the Italian parliament unanimously adopted a landmark law adding femicide to the criminal code as a criminal offence aimed at curbing gender-based violence. Meanwhile, its coalition partner, *Lega Nord*, stalled a key reform that would define sex without consent as rape, arguing that it could be used by women for personal vendettas; this move has delayed stronger protections for survivors. Other government officials and members of national and regional parliaments have also pushed to limit women's bodily autonomy.

## Historic revisionism

In January 2024, a neo-fascist commemoration in Rome marked by Roman salutes and fascist 'roll call' rituals by militants largely linked to *Forza Nuova* (New Force), a far-right Italian political party reignited the debate about how Italy responds legally and politically to contemporary fascist symbols and demonstrations. While Deputy Prime Minister Antonio Tajani condemned the event, Meloni remained silent, feeding the perception that she is selectively distanced from neo-fascist networks.

The episode reflects the government's broader 'politics of forgetting'<sup>36</sup> – a memory strategy that downplays or sanitises fascist Italy's wars and colonial violence, recasts aggressive campaigns as patriotic struggles for freedom, and sidelines anti-fascist narratives (with Holocaust denial remaining the

ultimate taboo). This approach creates fertile ground for historical revisionism and weakens the anti-fascist foundations on which the post-war republic is built. Yet Italy remains symbolically distinctive in anti-fascist activism: as the birthplace of fascism, it elevates the *Resistenza* (Anti-fascist Resistance) and the liberation of 25 April 1945 as foundational civic moments, directly tied to the constitutional order that followed. It is precisely this legacy that is now being contested.

## Geopolitical importance

Italy's political evolution holds significance beyond its borders. As a founding member of the EU and NATO, and the Eurozone's third-largest economy, Italy's democratic integrity underpins regional stability. Its influence also extends through strategic action in the Mediterranean and evolving relationships with key global partners. Further erosion of democracy in Italy could have significant consequences for other countries in the region, for the EU, and for NATO.

## Regional and global influence

Italy's democratic trajectory is closely connected to its engagement with European and transatlantic institutions. Meloni has effectively established herself as a central powerbroker in the EU. Following years of harsh anti-EU rhetoric, she has refashioned herself as a pragmatic partner in Brussels, working closely with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, helping deliver a deal on reforming EU asylum rules, and acting as a key interlocutor with North African states.

Her party's strong performance in the 2024 European elections under the slogan 'With Giorgia, Italy changes Europe' further consolidated her role as a pivotal figure on the European right. This has further entrenched her as a kingmaker on the right of the European Parliament, able to bridge the conservative mainstream and illiberal actors, giving

her disproportionate leverage to normalise ‘Orbanisation’ within the EU<sup>37</sup>.

Meloni has also sought to elevate Italy’s role in transatlantic relations. She was the first EU leader to visit Trump in the Oval Office, opening the meeting by emphasising their shared ‘fight against woke and DEI [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion] ideology’, and alignment on hardline migration views. At the same time, she reaffirmed Italy’s support for Ukraine and NATO, illustrating her broader strategy to position Italy as a strategic bridge between the United States and the EU.

Trump publicly praised Meloni both for her anti-immigrant stance and for her influential role within the EU and promised to visit Italy, setting the country as a springboard for negotiations with the European institutions. US Vice President Vance then travelled to Italy to hold talks with von der Leyen and he, too, publicly praised Meloni as a bridge-builder.

Italy also plays a strategic role in the Mediterranean, with migration increasingly central to its foreign policy agenda. The government is pursuing an externalisation strategy through bilateral and EU-brokered agreements with Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Albania, contributing to a reduction in arrivals. It has also sought to expand its influence across Africa by promoting similar partnerships, positioning itself as a key figure in negotiations between the EU and African states<sup>38</sup>. Human rights organisations warn these agreements risk enabling human rights abuses, particularly in Tunisia, where EU-funded security forces have been implicated in serious violations<sup>39</sup>.

Concerns about accountability in this broader approach have also been sharpened by ongoing litigation linked to Libya: in October 2025, a torture survivor filed an application against Italy at the European Court of Human Rights over Italy’s alleged failure to cooperate with an International Criminal Court arrest warrant by surrendering a senior Libyan official suspected of torture and other grave crimes<sup>40</sup>.

## **Geopolitical and economic factors**

Italy’s geographic location at the crossroads of Europe, North Africa, and the Balkans grants it critical geopolitical leverage.

It is a frontline actor in maritime security, border control, and energy (where its strategy is currently focused on diversification away from Russia, with increased reliance on Algeria and Libya, further deepening its Mediterranean entanglements) and hosts major US and NATO military assets<sup>41</sup>.

As the eurozone's third-largest economy, the country boasts strong industrial sectors – especially manufacturing, design, and agri-food – but struggles with long-standing structural problems, including a public debt near 140 per cent of GDP, deep regional disparities, and low productivity. With €191.5 billion in funds, Italy is one of the largest beneficiaries of the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility. Because payments depend on meeting previously agreed milestones and reforms, the RRF provides both the EU and domestic stakeholders with leverage to press for governance and rule-of-law safeguards as part of Italy's recovery plan.

# Countering democratic decline

Italy currently presents a medium-to-high level of tractability for democratic resistance and engagement and retains crucial democratic defences.

Despite the threats outlined above, the country's constitutional framework, active civil society, and integration into European legal mechanisms provide meaningful avenues for resisting further autocratic drift. Elections continue to be free and fair. Civil society organisations, grassroots movements, and investigative journalists remain active and resilient. Both domestic and international legal channels are accessible. The judiciary, while targeted, remains independent and continues to function as an effective legal check through routine review, striking down government legislative initiatives deemed unlawful or unconstitutional.

Notably, in June 2025, the Italian Supreme Court released a 129-page report questioning the validity of the Security Decree<sup>42</sup>, and pointing out serious constitutional flaws, including the lack of genuine urgency, misuse of criminal measures, and the inclusion of thematically unrelated measures.

Italy's situation highlights how even well-established democratic systems are susceptible to gradual decay via the slow corrosion of norms, oversight, and civic trust. It is in the early stages of democratic strain. Its case is not one of democratic collapse but democratic decline. Research into democratic backsliding and resilience published in 2025 indicates that the sooner democratic backsliding can be stopped, the higher the probability of success. Yet this phase is also when resistance is most often delayed or overlooked. As the authors noted: 'the timing of resistance is crucial... Early in erosion processes opportunities exist to defend democracy.'<sup>43</sup>

# Opportunity for change

The country stands at a democratic crossroads. Whether Italy continues further along a path towards illiberalism or it reasserts its liberal values will depend upon three key forces: the ambitions of those in power, the robustness of institutional resistance, and the vigilance of an engaged civil society.

## Top areas of engagement

Power for Democracies' research included expert interviews. Two areas for democratic engagement were identified: (1) legal support; (2) advocacy.

Supported by a robust legal infrastructure, strong academic expertise, and multiple European and international review mechanisms, legal support and advocacy can yield enforceable, precedent-setting outcomes that both counter

rights-restricting measures and reinforce democratic safeguards over the long term.

## Democratic opening

Power for Democracies considers the 2025 Security Decree to be a central and strategically important opportunity for civic action to defend democracy in Italy. The decree encapsulates broader backsliding trends: it normalises emergency-style governance, expands coercive state powers, criminalises non-violent dissent, and weakens parliamentary oversight and core rights such as freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Crucially, this is a near-term democratic opening and window for impact. The decree is still in the early stages of implementation, and debate over amendments or repeal remains open.

The significance of the decree extends beyond its specific provisions, as it exemplifies a wider pattern of pressure on the rule of law and institutional safeguards. Effective pushback could create momentum for pro-democracy initiatives on other issues, such as the *Premierato*, Meloni's judicial overhaul, and the 2027 general elections. Using the Security Decree as an entry point into a broader strategy to defend the rule of law creates space to address parallel and mutually reinforcing developments.

Italy's Constitutional Court has historically played a moderating role and retains the authority to restore protections for peaceful protest and civil disobedience. Supporting civil society's efforts to shape early litigation can help ensure that initial cases are well-documented and strategically managed, strengthening the chances that unconstitutional restrictions are struck down before they become entrenched. Strategic litigation can also defend individuals and civil society organisations and generate public debate. Supporting this legal ecosystem through public-interest law infrastructures and rights-advocacy networks will be essential to preserving civic space.

Leveraging the Security Decree as an entry point for wider, multi-faceted pro-democracy developments aligns with the operational strengths of Italian civil society organisations, which combine legal expertise with deep contextual

knowledge. Keeping the Security Decree at the centre of engagement while allowing for lateral litigation, advocacy, and mobilisation around related institutional threats, enhances strategic coherence, preserves flexibility in a fast-moving political environment, and increases the likelihood of sustained impact over the medium term.

At the European level, systematic documentation of rights violations under the decree and other legislative initiatives can feed into EU oversight. This can reinforce the impact of conditionality on debt relief and anti-corruption benchmarks, making it harder for the government to pursue policy shifts away from liberal democracy without political and financial cost.

## **Recommended action: Legal support & advocacy**

In Italy, legal support – including strategic litigation, support for public-interest law resources and networks, and legal aid – has emerged together with advocacy, such as awareness-raising, lobbying, and mobilisation, as among the most promising and feasible tactics for democratic protection.

Given Italy's institutional history and the continued, if strained, resilience of its courts, these tactics remain among the most tractable and impactful ways of countering democratic erosion under the Meloni government.

Italy has a substantial number of civil society organisations that routinely litigate on civil liberties; these have a strong and well-documented track record of pro-democracy work. Donor support to this ecosystem can be pivotal in ensuring that contested measures receive rigorous constitutional and European scrutiny, strengthening broader defence of civic space and the rule of law.

## Theory of change

Support of both legal action and targeted advocacy by civil society organisations increases capacity not only to challenge unconstitutional measures and protect fundamental rights through the courts, but also to mobilise public awareness and build societal and political pressure.

This theory of change is based on the understanding that legal action and advocacy are most effective when pursued in tandem. Together, litigation and advocacy constrain illiberal governance, reinforce institutional checks, and preserve democratic norms.

Civil society organisations document democratic violations to build strong legal cases and generate credible evidence for public campaigns. Legal proceedings are paired with advocacy designed to raise awareness, engage stakeholders, and amplify the societal impact of court rulings. When courts uphold fundamental rights and constrain executive overreach, these victories help raise the political cost of anti-democratic governance. Over time, this dual-track approach reinforces institutional safeguards, protects civic space, and contributes to preserving democratic norms during a period of heightened democratic risk.

Legal support and advocacy in Italy

## **Theory of change**

Donor investment in litigation and advocacy  
infrastructure



Civil society organisations monitor and document  
democratic violations



Civil society organisations initiate or support  
selected strategic litigation cases and engage in  
public advocacy



Courts issue rulings that constrain abusive  
legislation and uphold fundamental rights



Democratic norms and institutions are defended  
and strengthened

## **Legal action and advocacy in Italy**

In the Italian context, legal action and advocacy includes:

- documenting violations and individual cases to select the most appropriate cases for strategic litigation;

- developing shared resources to support litigation and advocacy efforts;
- taking strategic litigation cases before domestic and European courts to push back on oppressive and/or unconstitutional laws;
- providing amicus curiae briefs in cases not directly litigated;
- organising public campaigns to build citizen support around key cases;
- drafting legislative proposals and legal recommendations to strengthen oversight bodies;
- providing legal training to extend the capacity of litigators and advocates;
- advising judges on procedural strategy to increase the likelihood of cases litigated at the Constitutional Court.

## Evidence of effectiveness

Italy offers strong case-based evidence that strategic litigation can produce pro-democracy outcomes. Both the Constitutional Court and European human rights bodies have repeatedly issued decisions that: (1) invalidate rules that distort representation or weaken rights protections, and (2) compel legally binding institutional adjustments.

Domestically, the Constitutional Court has demonstrated its willingness to intervene when core democratic guarantees are at stake, in both 2014 and 2017, the court struck down key elements of the electoral law, demonstrating that constitutional review can constrain electoral engineering and force the redesign of the ‘rules of the game.’

At the European level, litigation has produced system-level reforms. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) treated prison overcrowding as a structural problem in 2013<sup>44</sup>, prompting government action to safeguard human rights. In 2015<sup>45</sup>, the ECtHR criticised the inadequacy of Italy’s criminal-law framework for torture, leading to the adoption of Law No. 110/2017 introducing torture offences. Both cases were initiated by Italian civil society organisations.



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