Italian civil society: from target to antidote to the crisis of democracy?

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1. Introduction[1]

Since 2015, when the migration crisis escalated, the European Union (EU) has been swept by a wave of populism and as well as by the proliferation of xenophobic policies and discourse that regard migrants as a serious threat to national security and public order.

Civil society organisations, especially non-governmental organisations (NGOs) engaged in Search and Rescue Operations (SAR) in the Mediterranean Sea were the first to take action in response to the emergency (Allsopp et. al., 2021)[2]. While at first these organisations were praised for their commitment to helping those risking their lives in an attempt to reach Europe, since 2016 they have been exposed with increasing frequency to accusations of aiding and abetting illegal migration and colluding with human traffickers[3].

In Italy, the head-on attack against organisations involved in rescue operations at sea had an impact on civil society as a whole; the organisations involved in migration issues were subjected to a veritable campaign of defamation, but the delegitimisation affected all associations involved in the promotion and protection of fundamental rights.

In the following three years we witnessed a significant delegitimisation of NGOs, whose work was hindered and limited not only by the introduction of restrictive regulations on field activities, but also by criminal proceedings; all this was accompanied by a media criminalisation campaign (Allsopp et. al., 2021).

This period of delegitimization spanned across the Italian political spectrum: it began with the introduction of the Code of Conduct for NGOs in the summer of 2017 upon request of the Minister of Interior of the Democratic Party, Marco Minniti, a member of the centre-left government led by Paolo Gentiloni, and aggravated with the centre-right government Conte I (June 2018 - August 2019) formed as a result of the alliance between the Five Star Movement (M5S) and Matteo Salvini's League.

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[1] This research is part of the project "Winning the narrative" carried out by partners CILD, the Good Lobby and OBCT and funded by Civitates A philanthropic initiative for democracy and solidarity in Europe.

[2] According to a report by Amnesty, between 2015 and 2018, NGO ships succeeded in rescuing more than 118,000 migrants in the Mediterranean Sea, contributing with their personnel and equipment to a greater quality of rescue operations (Amnesty International, 2020).

[3] Restrictive measures against NGOs and human rights advocates have been adopted in countries such as Croatia, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, the United Kingdom, Spain and Switzerland (Amnesty International, 2020, p. 8).

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In addition to causing general public distrust towards NGOs, which in turn generated both a reduction in private donations (Chiodi, 2021, p. 246) and a decrease in volunteers in organisations and in support of human advocates (CoE, 2019, p. 12), such hostile rhetoric encouraged the introduction of restrictive and repressive policies against migrants and those who strive to help them, especially with regard to registration, coordination and financial transparency (Allsopp et. al., 2021).

The Code of Conduct imposes strong limitations on search and rescue activities of organisations in the Mediterranean Sea and introduces the possibility of security checks, carried out at the discretion of the Ministry of Interior, or even seizure if NGOs do not comply with the new regulations[4]. The Minniti Code also paved the way for a number of new, even stricter directives adopted between autumn 2018 and spring 2019, this time on the initiative of Interior Minister Matteo Salvini.

The Italian government's new directives raised great concerns within the international community, to the extent that in May 2019 six UN experts sent a letter to the Italian Foreign Minister expressing serious concerns about Italy's compliance with its obligations under international law and on the impact the new regulations would have on the safety of migrants and on NGOs' work. "Search and rescue operations," the UN experts stressed, "aimed at saving lives at sea and cannot constitute a violation of national legislation on border control or irregular migration, as the right to life should prevail over national and European legislation, bilateral agreements and memoranda of understanding, and any other political or administrative measures to fighting irregular migration" (Amnesty International, 2020, p. 64).

Not only did the 'closed ports' policy pursued by the Italian government remain unchanged in spite of international warnings, but it was further consolidated with the 'Decreto Sicurezza Bis' adopted in June 2019, a few months before Minister Salvini resigned and ended the Conte I government. The new decree gave greater powers to the Ministry of the Interior, which in the summer of 2019, jointly with the Ministry of Defence and Transport, forbade ships from three different NGOs to enter Italian territorial waters for public safety reasons[5].

During the period of criminalisation, the xenophobic narrative and restrictive regulations were also supplemented by criminal proceedings initiated by the Italian

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[4] Two examples are the seizing of the ships Iuventa and Open Arms respectively in August 2017 and March 2018.

[5] The government bans affected the ships Alan Kurdi from the German NGO Sea-Eye, Mare Jonio and Alex from the Italian NGO Mediterranea, and Eleonore from the German NGO Lifeline (Amnesty International, 2020, p. 68).

authorities against NGOs and human rights advocates: according to Amnesty International's report between 2015 and 2018 at least 158 human rights advocates are investigated and 16 NGOs face criminal proceedings (Amnesty International, 2020, p. 9). The legal grounds for such proceedings were often Article 12 of the Consolidated Law on Immigration, dating back to 1998, which condemns practices that may facilitate the irregular entry of a foreign national into the Italian territory (Amnesty International, 2020).

However, many of these criminal proceedings were dismissed, proving that the accusations made against NGOs do not reflect reality; in fact, judges insist that NGOs engaged in the Mediterranean respect the international law of the sea and work according to the instructions of the Italian Coast Guard (Amnesty International, 2020).

The period of criminalisation that created a hostile environment towards a portion of civil society organisations is largely to be attributed to political representatives. M5S Minister Luigi Di Maio, for example, is credited with the most successful catchphrase he used in April 2017 to refer to NGOs as "taxis of the sea", accusing them of constituting an incentive for migrant departures with their sea rescue operations.

Despite the partial change of direction by the Italian government, which in October 2020 amended the legislation regulating the work of NGOs at sea and made it less restrictive, the rules that had been introduced in previous years, the criminal proceedings, and the strong media campaign dealt a severe blow to the Italian civil society active in the field of reception and human rights. The collapse of the reputation of the entire sector jeopardises the contribution that civil society makes to safeguarding the rule of law and democratic institutions (Allsopp et. al., 2021).

1.1 Our puzzle

Our research aimed to explore the responsiveness of Italian civil society to what is internationally referred to as "the shrinking" or "narrowing" of "civic action spaces" (O'Flaherty, 2017; Civicus, 2021). Specifically, we investigated the capacity of civil society to participate in the political process, exploring possible strengths and weaknesses that affect or may affect the action of civil society.

We attempted to understand whether and how Italian civil society has changed over time, its relationship with politics and public opinion, and to what extent it has

initiated a reflection on its capacity to exert political pressure on the one hand, and on the importance of communication – and therefore of influencing public opinion – on the other.

Our research was driven by three main questions: why is Italian civil society so vulnerable in its relations with politics and has been cornered by the defamation campaign against it? Is Italian civil society able to effectively act on public policy? How successful is it in exerting its influence on public opinion?

1.2 Method

From a methodological point of view, we analysed the scientific literature dedicated to Italian civil society, the reports published on the subject by international organisations and carried out 18 in-depth interviews with representatives of national organisations of Italian civil society[6].

When selecting the interviewees, in addition to organisations working on migration issues – and thus directly affected by the shrinking of civic space – we included civil society organisations active in areas related to fundamental rights, such as justice, health and the environment, given their political relevance. This made it possible for us to obtain a more complete picture of the current panorama of civil society in Italy and to investigate how the relationship with politics changes based on the topic in question.

In our selection of participants, we also tried to include a representation of the social movements that have been successful in recent years amongst the younger segments of the population. During the selection phase we made sure to maintain a certain gender balance amongst the interviewees (9 men and 9 women) and were pleased to note that several organisations actually have women in top positions. Lastly, in an effort of self-reflection, we took into account our own experience as a reality sprang from a push by Italian civil society that took action to support the Balkans devastated by the wars of the 1990s, and our difficulties in operating in the public sphere and being acknowledged at institutional level.

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[6] All the interviews were conducted by telephone or remotely.

1.3 Civil society – target and antidote to the crisis of democracy

We opted for the term 'civil society', even though it is little used in the national debate, in which terms such as 'associations' or the 'third sector'[7] are far more common, and in which the acronym NGO has recently begun to spread following attacks on organisations active in sea rescue and international cooperation.

The term 'civil society' is not the most commonly used amongst the interviewees either. One of our interlocutors specifies that she prefers the term "associations of civic activism" to the concept of civil society, i.e.:

"Those organisations which, by bringing citizens together in an organised way, carry out actions in the public interest, with the term 'public interest' being used in three areas in particular: the protection of rights, the care of the commons and the support of people in vulnerable situations" (A.N.).

However, at the international level the term "civil society" made a comeback through the political discourse of Eastern European dissidents during the Cold War (Falk, 2003) and subsequently, after the fall of socialist regimes, became the linchpin of many Western policies aimed at supporting the democratic consolidation of countries in transition from authoritarian systems.

The term 'civil society' is commonly used to refer to associations in the public sphere that are part of the intermediate bodies that underpin a society and are dedicated to promoting the common good. With this term the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) refers both to NGOs committed to the protection of fundamental rights and democratic institutions and to trade unions and other types of organisations (professional, confessional and non-confessional, and the academic sector) (Council, 2007); for the Council of Europe, civil society is a set of independent organisations pursuing non-profit objectives, which is rather similar to the definition of the 'third sector' in Italy (CoE, 2007).

The decision to use the term 'civil society' in this analysis is due to the fact that the Italian situation is linked to the broader European context, taking into account that the space for action of civil society has shrunk not only in Italy: the criminalisation of solidarity has affected the whole of the European Union and some countries have suffered from authoritarian drifts (Chiodi, 2021).

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[7] In Italy there are at least six types of civil society organisations that can be ascribed to the third sector: voluntary organisations; social cooperatives; non-governmental organisations (NGOs); social development associations; foundations and public enterprises (Bassi, 2011:, p. 1).

This unexpected crisis in the European political space, where democracy was believed to be consolidated, has alarmed the European institutions and prompted various foundations to put in motion intervention policies to protect democracy and the rule of law even in EU member states. The most far-reaching initiative in this regard is owed to the European Commission, which in 2020 began publishing annual reports on the rule of law in each member country as a means of countering the decline of democratic institutions where necessary.

Civil society is identified as a fundamental interlocutor both in the preparation and in the presentation of the reports and is also the focus of one of the chapters of each report as a major actor in the operation of the rule of law, together with the media and, of course, the judiciary (EC, 2020; EC, 2021).

2. A snapshot of Civil Society in Italy

2.1 Shrinking civic space

Our interviews were based on the assessment of the situation of civil society contained in the first Report on the Rule of Law in Italy published by the European Commission in 2020. We asked our interviewees to comment on the report when it states that *"Italy has a vibrant and diverse civil society. However, a negative narrative affects the environment in which NGOs active in the migration and asylum field operate and the civic space is considered as narrowed"* (EC, 2020, p. 18)[8].

The term "narrowing" used by the Commission refers to the categorisation used by Civicus, an international NGO that through its monitoring system assesses civic space in 196 countries around the world, classifying it into five categories: open, narrowing, obstructed, repressed, closed[9]. According to this definition, in a country with shrinking civic space *"citizens are free to exercise their rights to freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression, but the full enjoyment of these rights is obstructed by occasional hindrance/harassment, arrest or aggression of people deemed critical of those in power"* (Civicus Ratings 2021).

Most of our interviewees expressed no doubts about the shrinking of civic space in recent years at the expense of human rights organisations. As one interview recalls, Italian civil society has struggled to defend it:

"It is a space that is defended with great strength, with much effort I would say. It is a space that has known periods of closure. I am obviously not talking about health issues, but about a previous period" (R.D.)

While the shrinking of civic space is considered a reality for all our interviewees, it must be taken into account that civil society is not a monolithic or homogeneous entity and everyone's space does not shrink in the same way.
The FRA published in 2018 the outcome of a study on the different challenges affecting the work of civil society organisations working in the field of fundamental rights in the EU. The study, which analysed the period between the years 2011 and 2017, identified at least four categories of factors affecting their work: a) disadvantageous changes to the law or inadequate implementation of laws; b)

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[8] In its second report published last July, the European Commission reiterates that although "some aspects of the legislation on civil society organisations working with migrants have been improved (...), problems persist with regard to civic space" which continues to be considered "narrowing" (EC, 2021, p. 20).

[9] For the definition of the categories see Civicus Ratings https://monitor.civicus.org/Ratings/.

difficulties in accessing funds and ensuring their sustainability; c) difficulties in coming into contact with decision-makers and contributing to the decision-making and legislative process; d) attacks or harassment directed at human rights defenders, including negative discourse aimed at delegitimising and stigmatising associations (FRA, 2018, p.13).

Some of the challenges identified by the FRA strongly match the testimonies of our interviewees, especially with regard to the last three points that we discuss backwards.
As already highlighted in the introduction, Italian civil society has found itself for the first time in a context of the shrinking of its ability to act due to repeated attacks on organisations engaged in rescue operations of migrants at sea and more generally towards those who solidarise with migrants in the country. In this framework, it became clear during the interviews that the criminalisation of solidarity is a **recent** and **unprecedented** phenomenon:

"Those who are most heavily criminalised are those who deal with rescue boats. Then also those working on land are criminalised, but still ships have been the most subject to this kind of action as well as to investigations and so on. This is quite atypical as in the past those who did this kind of work were not investigated" (M.U.).

One interviewee, specifying that the delegitimisation of NGOs is not only an Italian phenomenon, remarks that in Italy, in addition to the criminalisation of those who rescue at sea, the **extension** of delegitimisation has been worrying:

"(...) of anyone who did not belong to the private or public category, therefore NGOs, social movements, anyone who did not recognise themselves in being a company or in a public institution, therefore the attack on Sea Watch, Proactiva Open Arms, MSF that are not NGOs as such, which are very different from NGOs that work in cooperation; in the end, however, it was extended to all NGOs" (F.M.).

The criminalisation of aid that spread in Italy, as in many other European countries, has been a frontal attack on a great tradition of solidarity, which has been faced with:

"(...) a strong psychological and intimidating pressure on NGOs and individuals who decided to take action (...) the constant use of force and the continuous multiplication of tools designed to intimidate and frighten the people who wanted to deal with these issues, far from the public eye of course" (V.C.).

As one interviewee points out, amongst the consequences of the defamatory campaign against civil society engaged in the field of migration they saw a

distancing of the political interlocutors with whom they normally interacted. Even invitations to public events where migration issues were discussed were likely to find no candidates among the political representatives open to dialogue:

"In recent times, to be honest, there has been a certain reluctance that has been somewhat telling in itself, a sort of hesitancy from politicians to accept our invitation. We do keep inviting them to take part, but in recent years there has sometimes been a sort of rejection" (L.S.).

What makes the difference, in evaluating whether or not the space for dialogue with politicians has shrunk, is in any case the area of work. There are topics for which there is a cross-party political consensus, unlike those related to migration:

"When it comes to healthcare, it is sometimes possible to have a dialogue with the full range of parties, if it is a cross-cutting issue, while on issues such as those related to civil rights there is certainly a complete rejection of some political forces and parties, needless to say" (A.N.).

As one interviewee stressed, there are different ways of shrinking civic space, including **total or partial exclusion from decision-making mechanisms**:

"In some cases, the space is totally denied. For example Roma organisations, they have no space and no access to any kind of decision-making mechanism, nor to any kind of consultation; in other cases the space is shrinking, due to political issues; for example all migrant or second generation Italian organisations unquestionably suffer from an asymmetry in access to decision-making mechanisms compared to NGOs that are more structured, which also have funds to dedicate to professional advocacy and lobbying; the same applies to social movements: their space for initiative is not necessarily directed at institutions, but at society itself, at creating the critical mass necessary to bring about a form of change (...)" (F.M.).

The case of the national strategic action plan for the inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Camminanti (RSC), drawn up in 2012 by the National Anti-Racial Discrimination Office (UNAR) in collaboration with the communities concerned, NGOs and local authorities, is an example of what our interviewee mentioned. As a recent report published jointly by the European Commission and the Romanì Foundation observes (Ciniero et al., 2019), several years after its approval, not only does the strategy seem to be barely making progress but the vast majority of the RSC community is also far from playing an active role in the decision-making process of the strategy itself.

On the other hand, also second-generation foreigners and Italians, due to the lack of space in public communication and a limited relationship with institutions, often

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times have to rely on more structured entities to pursue their demands. But this can have detrimental consequences for the autonomy of their associations, as some interviewees explained:

"In the last 20 years we have seen a progressive shrinking of the space in public communication of both the subjects of civil society, but also and above all of the real protagonists, i.e. foreigners. I think that until immigrants, foreigners and people of foreign origin play a leading role in the public debate concerning them, it will be difficult for us to make progress (...) but also in the relationship with the institutions, even in lobbying it is important that foreigners play a leading role. This is no easy task, though; over the years we have risked the opposite, which is to use foreigners as showcase characters, which has damaged many people and also many aspirations and goals (...)" (F.R.).

For other civil society organisations, on the other hand, the **shrinking** takes place in more subtle ways, **without direct attacks**, **through** the **multiplication of bureaucratic or administrative requests**, which is an alternative way of delegitimising NGOs. The very legislation under discussion, which is supposed to bring order to the sector, is for some an obstacle to the associations' activities:

"The heaviest attack – apart from the violent one that there has been against the organisations that deal especially with migrants and inclusion – is a continuous one, which tends to, as we call it, 'bureaucratise' that is, to make third sector organisations, NGOs etc., similar to the model of administrations. Even supposing that they can organise in a way that is similar to how administrations organise themselves is in any case an issue related to the shrinking civic space, even if quite covert" (A.N.);

"The main problem was that of regulating to shrink. It was not about regulating (...) to legitimise. (...) There was, however, a desire to constrain and shrink this work further. And on this pretext, of course, the desire to rectify abuses and so on, which always occur, but this is how it is" (A.T.).

2.2 The reasons for the shrinking of civic space

While it is possible to identify different experiences within a general trend of shrinking civic space, identifying the reasons for this situation is more complex. Undoubtedly, there are purely political issues underlying it: in recent years, the country has seen a continuous rise of populist forces, with a peak in 2016 during the migration crisis (Hamdaoui, 2021; Campani, 2018).

One of our interviewees explains how some political figures in Italy have followed in the footsteps of politicians such as Trump, Orbán and Bolsonaro:

"Who have based their electoral success precisely on giving rights to natives and taking rights away from those who come from outside" (R.D.).

A tendency which, according to our interlocutor, has led to a vision 'whereby you have to earn your rights by behaving decently'. In this way, the issue of rights has been turned into an object of contention by populist leaders who portray the idea of rights:

"Like a short blanket, in the sense that you can't cover the whole social body, so if you cover the feet you discover the head, and if you cover the head you discover the feet, a discourse set up by several European and non-European populist actors, who then also came to power in several countries, including Italy.". (R.D.)

Consequently, this conception of rights is also reflected in the perception of the associations that deal with rights:

"We, promoters of proposals on rights, are in turn seen as a divisive rather than uniting entity. Plus, there is a narrative that is not dominant in terms of figures, but is very strong, especially on social networks, whereby rights are not innate, but are obtained through good behaviour. And this means that, for example, prisoners who are in jail have not behaved well and do not deserve rights. And if they don't deserve rights they can be tortured" (R.D.).

A similar line of reasoning applies to the battle to guarantee canteen service to some children of foreign origin who, following a municipal regulation, were excluded. In the words of one activist:

"It is not true that when foreigners are penalised the Italians gain something, we are not taking away from Italians to give to foreigners, we are claiming identical treatment on the assumption of identical starting conditions, on an issue – giving canteen voucher – in which the narrative is «they are the ones who do not pay, they are the ones who occupy our spaces and our children are better than theirs»" (M.F.).

Across Europe, the rise of populism has been counterbalanced by the inability of "progressive" parties to promote an effective anti-populist political discourse and programme (Hamdaoui, 2021). As one of our interviewees commented on the Italian situation:

"(…) they were quite shy in a sense, because they were afraid to expose themselves to a public opinion that had already adopted a clear anti-immigrant orientation, therefore in order not to lose political consensus (…) they made very cautious statements, rather generic declarations on principles (…) nowadays there is one single way of thinking about migration in parliament, which is covert, embraced and shared to different degrees, but there is one single way of thinking. (…) there is a single way of thinking and unfortunately it is an anti-migrant way of thinking" (L.S.).

According to one interviewee, the underlying motivation of attacks on organisations dealing with migration is essentially linked to the search for electoral consensus:

"It is quite evident that, beyond ideologies, the fact of using the migration issue to achieve consensus and, therefore, win elections, is the most important factor in absolute terms" (A.R.).

The populist drift seems to have shown the weakness of the culture of rights in the country, while progressive forces have also followed suit. As one of the interviewees recalls:

"We had a baptism in the left" (R.D.).

Even left-wing political forces, it is noted, have not consolidated a culture of human rights:

"The left parties (who) have always conceived human rights as a connotation of liberal-bourgeois democracy, and therefore often put social rights before human rights, believing that human rights are something secondary" (F.M.).

One interviewee recalls how the first portents of these policies developed through the issue of security, which began to be intertwined with the idea of urban decency:

"After that, in 2017, in this long trend of urban decency and political campaign based on security, any left or right party, regardless of the political stance campaigned on urban security and decency […] and then there was the Minniti Orlando decrees in 2017 when this idea of decency was translated into urban DASPOs (t/n: denial of access to sporting venues) (…) So if you were caught sleeping somewhere the traffic warden could give you a 48-hour removal order, if you didn't respect the removal order you get six months of… you would be fined, Minniti imposed a fine, Salvini imposed a direct criminal sentence" (V.C.).

Italian civil society found itself alone in responding to politics that collectively denigrated search and rescue at sea, accusing it of being a so-called pull-factor for

migrants. In the political chaos resulting from increased migration flows, it became the second scapegoat, after the migrants themselves:

"Minniti was seen as a champion, the first one to realise that there was a problem with extremist do-goodism, as you might call it. He was in fact seen as «someone who finally deals with the issue of security in the left». The result is what we have experienced from 2017 to date and is still going on, a period of criminalisation of search and rescue activities at sea, as well as a dozen open proceedings and investigations, some still ongoing (…) So we had a baptism in the left, with a continuation in the right and the public opinion was eventually convinced on both sides" (R.D.).

Another interviewee points out that the pull-factor concept should be considered as a real political strategy, which is also common to other European populist leaders:

"A Frontex report was really aimed at delegitimising and frontally attacking NGOs, but that strategy was identical to that adopted by Orbán in Hungary. So there is in any case an axis of attack on organised civil society, an axis of the European right and beyond" (F.M.).

For all the interviewees, the **media and news stories** involving the third sector also played an important role in the shrinking of civic space. Notizie di Transito, the eighth report of the Associazione Carta di Roma (2020), highlights how NGOs involved in sea rescue continue to be the subject of harsh criticism in the media for allegedly attracting immigration (p. 4). Similarly, one interviewee notes how even the more progressive press has contributed to this situation:

"I remember the code of conduct for NGOs, progressive newspapers' editorials were excited about it, I still remember, «Doctors Without Borders must say where they stand» from the summer of 2017" (R.D.).

Several interviewees agreed in acknowledging the responsibility of the media, singled out for lack of professionalism and for riding the securitarian wave in turn, which was used in a way that was useful to their own idea of sales:

"I believe that collective conscience is built through language to a certain extent. (…) The language that is used is the one that helps them get more clicks, more sales, more relevance, so I think we are very much alone from this point of view" (V.C.).

Someone pointed out that, in the public broadcasting network, there was a willingness to review editorial choices when some organisations took the joint initiative of writing a letter of criticism:

"They apologised and said they would not do it again. (…) Obviously, this was exploited by the right-wing press, 'the associations censor RAI', you can imagine… but it was a small important step (…)" (A.G.).

On the whole, however, the general atmosphere of delegitimization of civil society, which was a generally well-regarded sector, caused a change in the attitude of citizens, who became more suspicious:

"The world of associations has always been well considered by the Italians; I believe that the campaign made by Minniti, starting from the NGO code, has created a distance between a good part of public opinion and associations, and I don't know if we will ever bridge the gap" (F.R.).

One interviewee also put forward a self-critical approach to civil society's ability to openly take a distance from the drifts in the third sector. In particular, the case known as Mafia Capitale, which saw the arrest of the heads of a cooperative working in the social sector, together with dozens of other individuals accused of Mafia-style criminal conspiracy, has not helped the reputation of the sector:

"June 29 does not belong to our history, but we have done too little for it not to belong there, because somehow this drift of the public function was not hindered by the collusive attitude of the private and social world as well" (A.M.).

As the sociologist Giovanni Moro points out, for two decades, thanks also to the media, an image of a 'third sector that is good no matter what' has been built up, projecting a glow of merit onto the whole sector without distinction. A case such as Mafia Capitale, therefore, caused a "boomerang effect", which led to the non-profit sector being stigmatised in its entirety (Moro, 2014).

Another explanation of the crisis traces its origins to the **defects of the Italian democratic system and the institutional culture of rights**. For some of the civil society representatives we interviewed, this is:

"A change caused by structural transformations that concern the crisis of democracy and representation and that have repercussions on the ability of civil society to have a dialogue with democratic institutions" (G.N.);

"(…) we saw what was an almost cheeky, racist policy. It was a whole part of a country, which for reasons that can be traced back to culture, to school, to education, kept giving their assent to this thing. (…) Actually, very often they were also ordinary people who, after the first republic, have grown up with this idea of the migrant as a problem" (M.U.);

"The whole period of Conte 1 really seemed to be the starting point of a period of strong limitation to the expression of the ideas of civil society, through limitations to the freedom of expression as much as to the right to peaceful demonstration and so on. I believe that this comes about, from time to time, depending on the composition of governments. But there is an original sin that I feel I must attribute to politics. It is the absence of a shared culture of rights. (…) The overall issue of a gap in the institutional culture of rights" (R.D).

In this sense, as one interviewee recalls, working on political culture is fundamental:

"We work daily in the field of education", which *"is not only within schools and universities but is also so much at the non-formal level across all contexts"* (M.U.).

Similarly, just as some interviewees recall that "there is a problem of subordination of human rights to interests of political positioning" (F.M.), others note that there are, on the one hand, cultural reasons and, on the other, regulatory reason:

"In Italy there is a problem related to human rights, just look at what happened in the penitentiary of S. Maria Capua Vetere, what happened in the penitentiary of Melfi (...) the delays or the risk of cancelling for the umpteenth time the debate on the DDL Zan, the fact that it took years to approve the law on torture, that second generation citizens have no citizenship rights... there is a problem of subordination of human rights to interests of political positioning. On the one hand Italy goes to the UN Council and says something like 'we are for human rights, we are committed to human rights', on the other hand this is not actually the case" (F.M.)

However, there is also a lack of clarity as to how participation should be incorporated into decision-making. For now, it is up to the judgement of individual politicians or local administrators to determine the level of openness of politics towards civil society:

"(...) From a certain point of view it is a cultural issue because we are not used to putting our ideas on the table and questioning them; then there is also a regulatory problem, because if I have to do something today in the regions and the [existing] obligations are more like technical procedures that are not codified, clearly no one will adopt them, because they are long, complicated and they require investments; in short, they are not something easy" (Z.G.).

Likewise, there are institutional shortcomings of which our interviewees are aware, but they do not give this particular aspect prominence in their actions:

"It is evident some parties have this strategy and are accompanied also by journalists or newspapers that close to them, but on the other hand you do not have institutions that are able to ensure the accessibility of these civic spaces; quite the opposite, they often contribute to shrinking them" (F.M.).

In Italy, there is no independent national authority on human rights (National Human Rights Institution - NHRI) able to supervise the usability of civic initiative spaces. The creation of the NHRI is a commitment that Italy made at the United Nations by signing the 1993 General Assembly resolution adopting the Paris

Principles[10], the international guidelines for the creation of national human rights institutions. To date, Italy is – together with Malta – one of the two European countries that have not yet created this independent institution and over the years there have been many recommendations from both the United Nations[11] and other international bodies, including the EU and the Council of Europe, to respect their commitments.

Since 2002, several legislative initiatives have been presented in Parliament to establish the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, however no law has yet been passed. The latest draft law for the establishment of the *National Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Fundamental Human Rights* is currently being examined by the Constitutional Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies. It lacks, therefore, a national structure that can be traced back to the models and international standards subscribed by the UN, models that are already implemented in other European countries (Pohjolainen, 2006).

With regard to the institution that deals with the protection of the right to equal treatment, UNAR – set up in 2003 to implement European Directive 2000/43 EC implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin – its limitation is that it depends directly on the government in office. Although according to the European directive the Equality body should have an autonomous nature, UNAR has been included in the Department for Equal Opportunities of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers.

Our interviewees are aware of the problem of the absence of the human rights authority as well as of the lack of autonomy of UNAR:

"The problem is that it is part of the Presidency of the Council and, therefore, although to a limited extent, the director must act carefully at all times in order to maintain a reference political space in which actions on territories are decided" (A.R.).

However, in the course of the interviews, we found little awareness of the need to work to strengthen the Italian Equality body or to lobby for the establishment of the independent human rights authority. As pointed out by some interviewees, whom were much convinced about the relevance of the issue, even the absence of an independent authority is attributable to the weakness of the human rights culture in our country:

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[10] The Paris Principles were developed in 1991 at the International Seminar on National and Local Human Rights Institutions organised by the UN Commission on Human Rights (since 2006 the UN Human Rights Council).

[11] Again, in 2019 as part of the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) 41 countries recommended that Italy establish such an authority.

"If this country had a culture of human rights at the institutional level, shared and supported, we would already have this institution by now and we would not hear those hypocritical justifications like «there is no need», or «another expensive authority»… those who say things like these really don't know what they are talking about" (R.D.).

As it emerges from the interviews, the solution to the problem is indeed quite tricky because the two bodies refer to different entities within the national institutional framework, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the independent authority on human rights, and the Presidency of the Council of Ministers for UNAR:

"There is a dynamic of conflict on the one hand within the ministries, because this issue (establishment of an independent authority, ed.), as far as I know, is monitored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but since following the European directive, like in all other European countries, there has been a body called UNAR, we are discussing the fact that UNAR is transformed, as it happened for the other European countries, in an Agency for human rights. However, this path clearly conflicts with the one that starts from the MFA, so there are two parallel paths, followed by different people and different areas that have led to the fact that no one in the end has led to a standstill on both fronts; this happened for not having taken a decision, as it is often the case" (F.R.).

The Italian civil society also seems to be blocked by the fear that the reorganisation of the sector with the creation of an independent authority for human rights could end up cancelling the work of UNAR or the Guarantors by making the few resources available lack:

"It is a fundamental risk – which among other things was feared during the last drafting of the DDL on the independent institution –, the risk that the competences of UNAR would be taken over by the independent authority in order to ensure continuity of funding, and this is a huge risk. I think this structure must be external and must be sufficiently funded. But it is clear that when you decide not to finance it or to take away the working tools it becomes just an 'image without substance'" (F.M.).

There are those interviewed who recognise the difficulty of Italian civil society in taking action to affirm the need to give human rights due consideration:

"Perhaps it is because we have only recently realised how dramatic and urgent this issue is for us too, perhaps there was a perception or idea that this issue did not concern us, that we were an evolved democracy and that therefore this issue was far from us and, if anything, it concerned countries in different conditions from the point of view of political order, social conditions… Then there were a number of episodes such as those that have occurred recently (…) which perhaps changed the perception of this reality a little. But I think we are still struggling to admit that this is a priority for our country too, because from this point of view we feel we have too many guarantees and sometimes things do not work because they are a bit hidden by reality. So, I guess this could be one of the reasons why there has not been a strong and collective commitment, because there has been an underestimation of how much

the problem concerns a country like ours" (A.N.);

"We jump from one emergency to another in the field of the protection of human rights (…). It took 28 years for the law against torture. We were trying to have the identification codes implemented for the 20th anniversary of Genoa. There is the DDL Zan, the refinancing of the mission in Libya, the work to dismantle the security decree that has been done in recent years, The establishment of a National Human Rights Institution seems to be going a little slow. We are waiting for the moment when 'nothing else is happening, so now we will deal with the authority'. I say this with some regret" (R.D.);

"It is as if no reality of the Italian civil society feels it as a priority" (A.G.).

One of the reasons why Italian civil society did not come out strongly in asking for an authority for fundamental rights to be set up for some is also attributed to the widespread mistrust towards Italian institutions, considered cumbersome, not very credible and difficult to reform:

"I see in it a lot of the problems of Italian bureaucracy (…). I think it is a bit due to the immobility of the Italian institutions, I think this plays a major role" (A.G.).

Also because, our interlocutor continued, the work with UNAR did not always live up to expectations:

"There is always this exhausting relationship. Yes, there are exchanges and cooperation, but not as much as there should be between a body that deals with these issues and in which many Italian realities converge" (A.G.).

In the last year, the creation by UNAR of a permanent consultation table for the promotion of LGBT rights and protection, according to the recent report of the European Agency for Fundamental Rights, should be read as a first step towards better cooperation with civil society (FRA, 2021, p. 51).

Undoubtedly, at the level of political debate, this is not an issue that resonates with public opinion, although a greater involvement of citizenship could be important and make a difference in terms of pressure on politics:

"I think that the issue of authority is seen negatively also at the level of public opinion, the idea that it's something that all in all is a frill. I don't think it's a popular topic. Maybe we consider it as a rather specialised subject on which we have to work through lobbying, institutional meetings. We can say that there has never been a massive civil society appeal so that you bring half a million signatures to parliament and say, 'see, this is a subject that civil society considers important'. (…) We should probably prioritise the issue, (…) I think it is also our responsibility" (R.D.);

"Then, there is also a limited attention to certain topics. When we talk about some topics we are told things like 'let's focus on relevant issues', as If human rights were not…(…) maybe also the fact that we have not had much success and have given up a bit, I would say…" (A.G.).

Finally, the **COVID-19 pandemic**, can be seen as the latest and most recent cause of the shrinking space for civic activation. In the last year and a half, the pandemic has had a strong impact on civil society work, forcing many organisations to rethink their modes of operation.

Of course, the first problem caused by the pandemic was that of aggregation, which affected above all that part of civil society that was not organised and that has always relied on direct relations with people as one of its main strengths:

"It is quite difficult to communicate in this period with the public and also with people in general. While before it was very simple to go and give a leaflet in the street, today it seems the most difficult thing in the world, so in this sense COVID-19 has been quite a lethal weapon for the movements" (M.S.).

On the other hand, and paradoxically, given the impossibility of organising public initiatives, the pandemic was also a great opportunity for grassroots mobilisation, to demonstrate once again the vitality and capillarity of Italian civil society. Since the first months of the health emergency, Italian civil society has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to respond to the needs of the population by coordinating new forms of mobilisation and widespread solidarity.

In many contexts, voluntary associations have been essential in distributing food and aid to people in difficulty both in large cities and in remote areas of the country, and in some cases they have also been active in providing remote assistance (tele-consultancy, tele-medicine) to the most vulnerable categories (A.N.).

In Rome, for example, in response to the pandemic restrictions, various associations dedicated themselves to solidarity and aid activities by promoting interventions on a territorial scale which contributed to making the role of the associations more visible and recognisable (Simone and Coletti, 2021).

A similar diffusion of solidarity was also studied in the province of Bergamo, where the various voluntary initiatives born on the territory during the months of the pandemic were mapped and then collected in the research "La gentilezza ti contagia" (Kindness is infectious), aimed at starting a reflection on the evolution and renewal of forms of solidarity (CSV Bergamo, 2021).

Some of our interviewees also pointed out that the pandemic was also an opportunity to rediscover the value of collaboration and the need to work together, to identify the lowest common denominator that makes it possible to tackle complex issues as a whole and not in a partial or incomplete manner:

"As with everything, the pandemic has not caused anything, the pandemic has thickened, aggravated, enlarged the things that were already wrong before, (if anything) I would say that today the pandemic has made it clear to us (...) that we are just not enough on our own, which is why today I see some degree of openness not only to get together, but something that strikes me and that I find more and more in the worlds of active citizenship (...) is to understand the links that bind the different issues, therefore not only to get together, but to break the specific spheres because in the face of complexity you cannot deal with it one little piece at a time" (A.M.).

Not only re-evaluating the importance of networking, but also rethinking one's way of working and acting:

"The pandemic has clearly touched our world in many ways, from the change in the needs of our beneficiaries, different needs have emerged in the most fragile parts of the population, because obviously this crisis has only exacerbated these difficulties and therefore the most fragile people in particular or those with the most difficulties have suffered even more. We certainly are in a difficult period. On the other hand, (there is) this real need to rethink what we do... an enormous crisis like this one of the pandemic that really calls into question many things, also many ways of working, of interpreting needs and necessities and consequently it is also an opportunity for all of us to try to understand how to act... we are in the triennial planning phase and it is nice to see how the context has changed and therefore it is necessary to rethink a slightly different role" (A.G.).

Certainly, the pandemic has contributed to accelerate the discovery of the web as a tool for both social activation and communication, leading civil society organisations to question what their role and space in the digital world should be. As one interviewee puts it, the pandemic has provided:

"The opportunity for a rethinking of their own ways of engaging civil society, their own attitudes, their own channels, their own modes of action. For example, the great importance that social channels, platforms, video conferences, and remote actions have had throughout this year and a half of the pandemic, all of which, perhaps with certain adjustments, have now become structural, and it will be difficult to do without these channels; communication will also have to take account of these new methods linked to the new technologies, which in a certain sense also break down spatial barriers, video conferences can be held much more than in the past and in a more normal way even at a distance, forms of communication in video conferences can be opened up much more easily, also because everyone has now bought platforms with other countries, so there is a certain transnationality that benefits from this" (L.S.).

From an economic point of view, however, the pandemic has particularly affected associations that relied on fundraising from private individuals to support their activities:

"The pandemic, as in so many other fields, dealt a heavy blow to associations, many projects that had already been financed had to be suspended, so there was also a deferment of payments, as a matter of fact... but also all the help desk activities that many associations provided were interrupted, the associations' relationships with civil society was suspended, so there was a lot of suffering, a lot of associations and part of civil society was left a bit unprotected" (L.S.).

As highlighted in a recent report published by the FRA, Italy is one of the few EU countries to have adopted measures to support civil society organisations during the emergency, demonstrating from this point of view a certain attention to the needs of associations (FRA, 2021).

3. Civil Society: Strengths and weaknesses

As can be seen from the previous section, the Italian civil society that is the subject of our study has faced numerous obstacles, on different fronts and levels, in recent years. This does not mean that associations are powerless: on the contrary, they were and have remained "strong and weak at the same time" (Magatti, 2010). This chapter, therefore, examines the capacity for political action of Italian civil society, starting from the strengths and weaknesses identified by the interviewees themselves.

3.1 Autonomy from politics

In the democratic transformation that followed the Second World War, Italian civil society organisations were strengthened in close alliance with the main political forces. As Ginsborg (2013, p. 288) notes, in the first two decades of republican history (1948-1968), society was divided by ideological lines and related political affiliations and participation was mainly channelled through the main mass parties. Subsequently, with the growth of the urban middle class, there was a significant development of civil society, which also remained attached to the main political parties.

Civil society's relationship with politics has undergone profound transformations over time. While until the 1980s the Communist Party, the Socialist Party and the Christian Democrats determined the leadership of the main associations, the situation has changed and this link has been broken:

"Until the 1980s a president and a secretary were decided by the Communist Party and the Socialist Party, each one could choose one. From the end of the 1980s onwards this no longer happened, they – luckily – abandoned us" (F.R).

From 1992, according to Bee (2017), the country began to adopt principles and structures typical of the Anglo-Saxon model based on the idea of democratic accountability. In particular, according to the scholar, the values inherent to an "open" form of government and a "minimal state" have provoked "a change in the role and functions of public institutions with respect to citizens, determining the form and dynamics of active citizenship in Italy" (Bee, 2017, p. 137).

In the interpretation of some interviewees, it is the result of an external influence if Italian politics today dialogues with civil society:

"Maybe also the international European system requires more and needs the parliamentarian to interact with civil society" (A.R.);

Most of our interviewees see an added value in the Anglo-Saxon model, which Italian civil society has approached over time: the fact that it has freed itself from political control in order to take on a role of stimulation, control and third-party status that is fundamental to the stability of democracy.

It is not surprising, however, as one of the interviewees observes when reflecting on the reputation of his work, that there is still little public recognition of the work that civil society does in relation to politics:

"Unlike in northern Europe one tends not to legitimise (in Italy) those who work professionally – I am not referring to the third sector in general – but those who in particular do very targeted work of investigation, advocacy or public campaigning. In Italy, let's not forget that it is very difficult to explain to your children what you do if you work there, your job, explain it to your closest friends etc. But this is not the case in most northern European countries: England, the Netherlands and Nordic countries and Germany" (A.T.).

Many of those interviewed said that the changes that took place have given vigour to civil society, that new spaces for expression have opened up in a traditionally lively social fabric, thanks **also to the crisis in political parties**:

"I believe that there are two most meaningful reasons that enliven the organisations in our society: one is precisely the fall of representation of political parties and the other is also a historical legacy of a lively organisation of citizens that has also led to the strengthening of what we could say today is the third sector; let's not forget that these are mostly voluntary organisations that in some way represent points of reference for citizens and, at the same time, represent a commitment to change and aspects of our daily life" (V.A.).

"If I have to be honest, compared to a few years ago, the capacity and possibility of dialogue is greater, because since the parties are weaker, they also sometimes have a less structured agenda and we often find ourselves in the paradox that they are the ones who offer to take on topics that could be of common interest" (A.N.).

The paradox of the last few decades, therefore, is that Italian civil society has proudly gained autonomy from politics, but this process took place while at the same time the parties were weakening along with democracy. The first victim of the wave of populism in Italy, in fact, were the parties, victims of themselves and of a smear campaign that aimed first and foremost to take away their public funding (Piccio, 2019).

With regard to the issue of the relationship between civil society and parties, the magazine Vita recently hosted a debate between the vice-president of the Constitutional Court and long-standing politician Giuliano Amato and some third sector organisations. Amato's proposal to third sector organisations – as subjects concerned with the common good – is to take charge of feeding the parties, to give

them the sap they have lost by moving away from the electoral base. According to Amato, the drying up of the reservoirs for the construction of the political ruling class is worrying for the stability of democracy, and it is necessary for civil society to take responsibility, which should not be afraid to return to the role of transmission belt for the parties (Amato, 2021).

In current Italian politics, although the direct link of control by politics over civil society has been lost, representatives of associations can be seen entering parliament and, above all, there are professional politicians taking on representative roles in associations.

Amato's proposal, however, is more radical than the structure that has taken shape in recent years because it proposes, in a new guise, to establish the organic relationship that, in its absence, has allowed Italian civil society to emerge as an autonomous and vital subject for democracy.

Among our interviewees, the initiative of Ti Candido and the Inequality and Diversity Forum is the one that comes closest to Amato's position. The aim of the #Facciamoeleggere campaign is essentially to encourage the entry into politics of people who are concretely committed to social justice, environmental sustainability and equal rights for all[12].

In the spectrum of positions adopted by the parties we met in each instance, there is a dominant **pride in the autonomy they have gained,** and the need to highlight the difference between the political and party dimension is often strongly perceived:

"With political parties you can discuss, you understand whether you can accept or not an invitation, but there must always be transparency and pluralism, no favouritism to anyone. Above all, they must also be competent, all parties … we are an association and a highly political reality, the claim is always political. Or better, it is never party-driven" (M.U.).

Another interviewee puts forward the same argument:

"The relationship with the political world is very strong, we are always considered a political association, not party-based but political, in the sense that for us doing politics means also looking at the role of NGOs and civil society associations, in the sense of participating in decision-making and trying to start the right paths in the regions. We always say that the great strength of our organisation is the fact that we are an association of citizens, but by being together we manage to have a much wider dialogue and strength; that single idea or intuition of a person, which would remain such otherwise, if shared within our association could become a proposal or start a process of change" (Z.G.).

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[12] For more information on the initiative: https://www.ticandido.it/

However, some of our interviewees recognise that the loss of an effective relationship between parties and civil society does indeed make it difficult to establish constructive alliances that produce results:

"We find it increasingly difficult to identify allies in the political field, we always say that we are a non-party, yet political, organisation; so, it is important to also have a dialogue with the world of politics, to try to do lobbying and advocacy activities that can lead to greater affection for these issues, etc.". We have been struggling quite a lot lately, let's not talk about this last period with this ramshackle government that goes from the centre-left to the extreme right, it is complicated" (A.G.).

The reason for the weakness in the response to the xenophobic wave described above, in the reading of some interviewees, would be precisely the estrangement of the progressive political class from civil society. The populist wave has created a divide between civil society and politics but what is needed now is:

"To re-establish a relationship with the base, with civil society to feed off this vitalism that is actually there as well as to give a political outlet to the expectations that do not find political representation. The whole of the most active civil society at a social level is very disappointed and disillusioned with politics, and this is very serious. So, apart from a few exceptions, which are still minority yet commendable, and which are trying to re-establish these channels of communication, for the rest, touch has been completely lost" (L.S.).

On the one hand, our interviewees therefore agree with Amato's reading. The traditional link between associations and parties allowed an easy turnover of staff, which would now be lost, to the detriment of the latter in particular. In the words of one interviewee:

"Pulling the plug on contact with the streets, with civil society, with the positive forces that civil society expresses in terms also of associations, movements, participation, activism, means having asphyxiated parties, which turn around themselves, which decide in the secretariats, always the same names, which draw among the bureaucrats of politics the new recruits who replace the older ones, so we have a very asphyxiated situation" (L.S.).

So, if on the one hand they proudly claim their autonomy, on the other hand it emerges as equally **necessary and important to continue to maintain relations with politics**.

One interviewee, who has been both an activist and a city councillor, underlines how crucial this is for civil society organisations as well as for politics itself:

"Our experience shows the need for politics in the institutions to take into account what happens outside the institutions and to do things for those who are outside the institution. This should be done out of choice, out of kinship, not because they are not interested in playing the role of someone else. How important it is that there is someone in the institutions who, not only during the election campaign, and not only because it is something required, looks outside and makes the requests for those people outside (…) I believe that there should not be mutual

distrust, but great mutual trust and an ability to cooperate, because what one party can do, the others cannot do, and vice versa, but if we have clear, transparent rules of engagement aimed at a goal, I think we can achieve results" (M.F.).

Along the same lines is another interviewee who notes the importance of maintaining dialogue with the institutions precisely in order to change policy, even when one' s own association has taken extremely critical positions on specific issues:

"(…) we have always seen the institutions as the ultimate interlocutor and, above all, the necessary and fundamental interlocutor to succeed in bringing about change, so rather than saying politics no longer works, parliament no longer works, we have always worked to change it and make it a useful place for the country and always maintained a dialogue with them" (Z.G.).

However, in order not to jeopardise the autonomy obtained, many interviewees stress the importance of maintaining a certain neutrality with respect to the political interlocutor; for this reason, many associations prefer to seek **institutional dialogue rather than party dialogue** in order to pursue their demands:

"When we see that something is wrong, the reference subject is not the political party, it is the institution that has the responsibility to carry out those measures (…) if we have to create appeals or request appointments, these are requested with the institutions. And then we may or may not agree with whoever holds that kind of role, as it has been very often the case" (M.U.).

Nevertheless, although some representatives of civil society point out that personal relationships with parliamentarians in the House or Senate favour the possibility of a direct exchange:

"Personal relations are always useful, they allow us to understand more from the inside what obstacles there are even within the same party for a more or less open stance towards migration" (A.R.).

Others, on the other hand, claim with great conviction the fact of addressing the whole constitutional spectrum and not having "a reference politician":

"We have battles to carry out or proposals to bring forward and with those in our hands we seek an absolutely secular dialogue. Then it is clear that on some issues we get more feedback and greater attention from some political groups and less from others (…) we believe that if a proposal is valid and it is a proposal of civil society the whole parliament should listen to it, then someone will take it up more closely, embrace it and move it forward" (M.U.).

What makes the difference with regard to the possibility of building a cross-party dialogue with parties and individual politicians, whereby results can be achieved, is obviously the subject matter:

"I have to say that there is no one-sidedness, they don't necessarily come from one political party. There is certainly an attention of the secular forces, of the left forces to the themes of rights, and therefore to the topic of freedom from violence, which are the topics that interest us

and that we keep mentioning, but there are also those on the other political side. I am thinking above all of certain institutional figures who often ask us for our opinion and then it is always what I was saying before, i.e. they ask us for our opinion, we give it and we work to be able to contribute to improve the legislative system, in the governance of the issue, but I must say that I do not see any predominance of one political force over another"(V.A.).

As some pointed out, the concrete experience is that when the political culture of the political representatives on the subject of fundamental rights does not offer guarantees, the situation becomes unmanageable:

"(...) It depends a lot on the government that you are dealing with, with some governments it is almost impossible to have a dialogue, there is no dialogue, there is only contrast unfortunately". (A.R.).

Another representative points out, however, that while it is good to recognise that there can be important differences between one government and another, distinguishing on the basis of 'left and right' is not always functional":

"So, in the same party you can find both an opening and a closing" (M.U).

Beyond the chosen interlocutor, what matters to make the relationship work is the constant care of relations with institutions and political representatives that allows organisations to gain a certain recognition and reputation:

"If you create a constant dialogue, a coherent and consistent one, which pursues a certain issue with assiduity and constancy and requires some transparency and accountability etc., then the politician gets used to it. They get used to it, and with some politicians, even at European level, they themselves ask us several times for suggestions on certain rules or on certain positions, information, suggestions, or they want to ask a question and they know that we have certain competences and so they ask us what to include in the request; or there can be a series of hearings on a certain rule and they contact us. This is also because there is a past, a background, a mutual knowledge (...). The representativeness of civil society organisations or their visibility is also very important. (...) in some cases we are fine with it, in other cases we have to build up a reputation" (A.R.).

However, regaining the relationship with politics does not mean establishing a relationship in which civil society is subordinate to politics as was the case in the past. Conversely, the idea expressed by our interviewees is that of subjects who have expectations of politics and who seek a **dialogue on an equal level**.

Some of the interviewees, in fact, do not at all appreciate that when a political role is recognised for third sector organisations, this is conceived as subordinate to politics:

"As if civic organisations were seen as a training ground for commitment and activism which should then flow as a higher outlet into party political experience'. And so, in conclusion in each of the two cases there is no recognition of the autonomous, political role of third sector organisations" (A.N.).

The hesitancy to recognise the autonomous political role of civil society is aggravated by the fact that today, when the term 'third sector' is used to refer to organisations engaged in the provision of services, they are not considered **fully-fledged interlocutors**. One of our interviewees therefore clarifies the difference between those who work in services and those who are primarily engaged in political advocacy:

"Those who provide services in a subsidiary manner with respect to institutions with a more or less extensive level of autonomy depending on the subjects but are not considered as privileged interlocutors in the political debate, unless organisations that do this by profession and participate in the political debate as a mission" (A.N.).

In the words of our interviewees, therefore, there is no sense of nostalgia for the operating methods of the First Republic: the autonomy gained in recent decades is valuable and they are proud of it. If anything, a certain nostalgia emerges for the civic action methods of the past, in relation to the difficulties of the present in the dialogue with politics:

"This country comes from an important period in the 1970s (…). The active civicism that knew how to create a system, which reflected on what it was doing, transformed its own experiences into proposals, and on the other hand had a policy that in some way reacted, that had the far-sightedness to listen and transform, which is the task of politics, to mediate, to become an intermediate body. This thing no longer exists, today there is often a careless or exploitative use" (A.M.).

In the testimony of other interviewees, it does not seem necessary to go that far to find a political interlocutor on certain issues, just go back to the 1990s:

"Now I don't remember the year, but it was normal in those years – it was an event at the Chamber in which there was the person in charge of justice of Forza Italia, the person in charge of justice of Margherita, the person in charge of justice of PDS, there was the person in charge of the radicals, you had political interlocutors who dealt with that matter, for them it was normal to interact with you, for you it was normal to interact with them, because the parties did exist. These were the last years in which the traditional political parties existed, which were an instrument that served exactly that purpose" (A.S.).

Such a more direct dialogue with politics was also facilitated by the fact that the very parliamentarians one came into contact with were competent in the field of the association. Now, however, this is no longer the case:

"With the change of the party system these profiles don't exist anymore, and basically now the panorama (…) is that the party is a mass of parliamentarians who don't count for anything, let's say, with whom it is useless to generally have an interlocutor because they don't decide anything and don't resemble the traditional political decision-maker; (…) the context has changed so much" (A.S.).

The interviews highlight how the vitality of civil society, which can be seen even today by working in the field, does not find a channel to express itself in institutional politics:

"I believe the problem is that the left-wing parties have progressively and dramatically lost touch with civil society, so there has been such a disconnection to the point that civil society – which in itself retains very positive ferments, movements from below and is very vital – do not find a reference point at the political level, because the civil society of the progressive area can relate to the parties of the left less and less, because from the second republic onwards there has been a progressive distancing of these parties from the people in the streets"(L.S.).

In the words of another interviewee, it is politics that does not know how to recognise the interlocutor:

"(...) Economic, social and cultural inequalities are exacerbated and made unbearable by unequal recognition. Politics no longer looks at the edges, except in terms of building consensus on the instrumentality of phenomena, but that is another thing" (A.M).

In addition to the difficulty of finding an interlocutor, another problem faced by the associations relates to the difficulty of concretising the demands made.

Bee (2017) underlines the existence of a paradox of the Italian case in the relationship between citizens and institutions. On the one hand – the scholar stresses – not only does Italy enjoy one of the highest levels of participation in elections in Europe, but citizens, especially in more recent years, have expanded their participation in political life through other instruments such as civil society organisations, referendums, primary elections or popular legislative initiatives.

On the other hand, however, citizens' trust in politics is particularly low and often accompanied by high levels of dissatisfaction with the work of various governments. As Bee puts it, this paradox can be explained by the lack, in the Italian political context, of the central dimensions of accountability, such as transparency, the circulation of information regarding political choices and their consequences, the justification of policies and measures adopted by governments and sanction mechanisms (Bee, 2017, p. 271).

As examined in detail in chapter 4, the representatives of the organisations we interviewed strive to work precisely in the direction of ensuring transparency and effectiveness in political action. They have regular dealings with political representatives and local, national and international institutions, provide opinions and evaluations on legislative measures, draft shadow reports, sit at tables relevant to the issues they deal with, participate in hearings of the House and Senate, some have consultative status with international organisations and make use of participatory mechanisms.

The doubt is that although the party-civil society dynamic has changed and procedures have been put in place to make the report effective, it is mainly a ritual:

"From a procedural, regulatory, etc. point of view, there are spaces that allow civil society to express itself within the institutions. I am particularly referring to parliament, through missions, dialogue with individual MPs or groups of MPs who take on board the requests of civil society. All this works on paper, because sometimes it seems a bit of a ritual. In the end, we need to understand what the change is in all these parliamentary hearings. Sometimes it really does seem a bit of a ritual. A rather empty ritual of the parliamentary process. So it's a bit of a mixed judgment. The tool is in place, it is used, but the results are questionable" (R.D.).

Even when there is close dialogue with politicians, the concrete results are not visible. The assessment of effectiveness and impact varies from one initiative to another. For some, there is a risk of playing one side or the other, publicly posing as those who talk to civil society but lacking substance and commitment:

"They have been invited, their requests have been listened to and then we will see, then in the end there is never anything concrete, but nothing done, so a bit of disappointment in this sense" (M.F.).

The same idea of limitation in the concrete results obtained can also be seen in the case of an association that takes an active part in consultation processes, complaining about the appropriation of the ideas put forward by the same association by political representatives:

"But there is the bad habit of certain politicians, of certain political representatives, of appropriating the ideas and proposals that we put forward without, on the one hand, recognising their origin, and therefore without valuing the contribution of the organisations that developed them in the political relationship that has been built. I have to say that it is an obstacle represented by participatory processes that are participatory in name only (...)" (V.A.).

Last but not least, in this relationship between politics and civil society that has never really been resolved, there is the doubt of not being taken seriously:

"The feeling that remains is that the institutions do not really take into account the opinions, suggestions, constructive criticism and proposals of those who really work in the field and are good at it" (A.V).

These words echo those of other interviewees:

'It is easy to have a dialogue with the ministry, but it is difficult to obtain concrete results afterwards. (...) the willingness to engage in dialogue often does not translate into an effective capacity to achieve objectives" (V.C.).

In addition to the ambivalent relationship with politics, there is also the difficulty of civil society in dealing with state administrations:

"Immediately afterwards there is the mechanism of the public-administrative machine. The public administration in Italy is old, inadequate and absolutely closed. So, when you have a politician who listens to you and says 'yes, let's do it', then sometimes you get stuck in the system of power mechanisms inside the machine" (A.M.).

Public administration itself in ordinary conditions is not always the same. For example, a few interviewees highlight the difficulties of dialogue with the public security department of the Ministry of Interior, a key office for working on migration issues:

"It depends on the departments, because with the Dipartimento libertà civili (civil liberties department), which follows the whole issue of reception and integration, there is a relationship, we also participate in meetings, calls for tenders, etc..., even if, as it is usually the case, also the prefect of reference changes from government to government, as much as the possibility to have an easier or less easy interlocutor, but with another department, which is the most important one for the issue of landings, safe harbours etc., which is the department of public security, we also made formal invitations, put pressure through personal e-mails that we obtained through other people, but we have never been replied" (A.R.).

Another aspect of the relationship with politics that, however, makes the work of civil society particularly important is linked to the culture of emergency:

"The tendency of certain politicians to take action only in the face of dramatic events, promising decisive actions and commitments that then come to nothing and even the press and the media that give them a voice do not bother to check whether the commitments made verbally are then actually translated into action" (V.A.).

It is no coincidence that a trend identified by Bee (2017) as a consequence of the strong polarisation and fragmentation of the Italian political system is the gradual refusal of politicians to take responsibility for choices capable of negatively influencing their political career. Therefore, frequently, the most important political decisions are taken as a response to emergency or extraordinary situations, and often, under the pressure of an external actor such as the EU. A recurrent reflection among our interviewees:

"(...) politics no longer decides anything. Back in the day it took a certain amount of time to reform the justice system, but now there is no reform of the justice system, and even when there is, it is because the European Court of Human Rights condemns you, or because Europe won't give you the money.... the Italian political class, at least on our issues – but I sincerely doubt that we are only talking about our issues – is not able to assume responsibilities that are not substantially responsive to emergencies" (A.S.).

Similarly, one interviewee recalls how EU intervention was crucial for Italy from an environmental point of view, both in a 'preventive' and 'punitive' way:

"Europe has sometimes saved us with good directives and regulations that have helped us to have also positive national regulations. Let's think of the framework legislation on water, the law on purification, the regulations on the circular economy, to mention the last one implemented in Italy in 2020, and many others... renewable sources, climate strategy... It has also helped us not in terms of prevention but in terms of 'punishment', which however have been useful, I am thinking of the infringement procedures (...)". (Z.G.).

It is precisely the presence of organisations on the ground that strive to give visibility to fundamental rights, and to the issues that need to be tackled to protect them, that makes it possible to move away from the emergency logic that is being questioned.

Finally, a last issue affecting the relationship between civil society and politics concerns the influence of certain economic actors on the latter. On some important issues, such as the refinancing of the mission in Libya or the relations between Egypt and Italy, the perception of the interviewees is that the weakness of the state is such that it is not political forces but economic powers, primarily the energy and military industries, that dictate the political agenda:

"In the case of Giulio Regeni and Patrik Zaky, it is clear that in the end the geopolitical interests of ENI and Egypt's role in the Mediterranean chessboard or towards Libya are predominant compared to a real battle to demand justice. For example, Italy would never declare Egypt a dangerous country in order to prevent tourists from going there or to create this strategy of pressure, or it would never say that we block any investment because ENI has the largest natural gas field in the Mediterranean at Zohr, so... these things, I think, have a huge impact" (F.M.);

"The problem is to understand what kind of constraints there are, and it is not our task, but to be aware of it and to want transparency on this is something that would be much more necessary.(...) we have seen that it is not only Libya that is involved, we have Egypt with its cases, we have the fact that the Italian military industry, the one that produces weapons, supplies weapons to those countries that are not democratic at all" (M.U.).

According to some, in the Italian political set-up there is real collusion between economic and political interests that thwarts the action of civil society:

"A problem of state capture, of public-private combos, essentially state corporations that in the end create what we call a parallel state (...) that has its cutting edge in ENI but we could name other corporations. But beyond corporations, there is a world that revolves around that and emerges systematically once in an investigation, sometimes elsewhere, etc., but that is basically what governs our policy at least [in areas such as] foreign policy, energy, infrastructure" (A.T).

3.2 Challenges in networking

In the face of the shrinking civic space experienced in recent years, Italian civil society has proved unprepared and essentially vulnerable:

"All the denigrating campaign about NGOs taxis of the sea etc., there was not as unified a response as there should have been. I was such a pity" (A.G).

The Italian civil society landscape is traditionally rather fragmented (Civicus 2006): civil society organisations vary in size and representativeness and, while some have acquired national relevance, most have only a local or, at most, regional projection. In the words of some interviewees:

"Civil society organisations are very numerous and are scattered all over the territory some are more organised, others less obviously. (...) There is a great variety of Italian civil society, there is a great presence nationwide and the ability to not appear too fragmented and to constitute aggregations at national level that can enter the political debate" (A.R.);

"It is difficult to read the panorama of active citizenship in a single way; certainly this is a country which, in its different forms and with different densities, has an active citizenship that we could say is vibrant, diversified, produces initiatives, often (...) even in hard contexts, we find experiences linked to active citizenship. It is certainly a diversified, multiple, present, different active civicism" (A.M).

In order to be able to influence political decision-makers and respond to possible attacks, Italian civil society must overcome fragmentation and build alliances capable of making them effective. For some organisations, direct dialogue with political actors is made difficult by their small size:

"We are not organisations that have the capacity to have a direct dialogue especially at a national political level, so bringing forward requests with other organisations is really crucial, because it is important to combine not only competences but also the network of relations and contacts" (A.G).

In order to strengthen their position vis-à-vis politics, several stakeholders underline the added value of networking with other civil society actors:

"Many of the things we have achieved or aim to achieve could not be possible in a logic of single organisations no matter how strong" (A.N.).

Indeed, collaboration with other organisations allows for transversal strategies, combining advocacy methods at different levels:

these strategies *"are very interesting because they bring together associations (…) that mainly do technical research work with other associations that have access to important newspapers with exposés, denunciations, shadow reports… I believe that's a key element"* (F.M).

Especially for small and medium-sized organisations, networking and joint political action is essential, not only because it brings together knowledge and skills, but also because it can create trust and long-term relationships between different actors:

"It is important to combine not only expertise but also the network of relationships and contacts" (A.G.).

Although a strong need to network emerges amongst some of our interviewees, the inability of Italian civil society to build political alliances is often stressed. Among the reasons highlighted to explain what it obstructs, **there is the urge to be at the centre of attention on the part of the associations**:

"(Networking) should be the basis of the work of associations. I think we are very bad at doing it, we could do it a thousand times better, because we do it in various contexts, but there always comes a time when one single organisation strives to emerge in an individualistic outlook, so maybe we start a common path together and then it gets blocked because there is some problem of authorship or ownership of topics and information sharing. There is a great effort to work together but most of the times this effort is useless in the face of the individualism of many organisations. I think it should be the foundation of our world; it is not merely useful, it is really necessary, but we are not able to do it, in Italy especially we are not able" (V.C.).

Of course, every organisation struggles to get the visibility it needs to sustain its activity and sometimes all of this conflicts with the commitments required by horizontal practices.

Some interviewees explain this difficulty of joint action with other actors by the problem of **mistrust**:

"There is a low capacity to network (…). Active citizenship (…) is often mistrustful, it sometimes get some people to be interested in the work of others, but often times it is not out of curiosity, but rather out of mistrust, and therefore often does not foster cooperation (…). This type of active civicism, even when it is active, finds little attention from politics (…)". (A.M.).

Others found the causes of the difficulty in networking in the absence of a culture of participation:

"We do not yet have a culture of participation, i.e. for us participation means expressing our personal point of view and trying to put it forward, whereas on the part of the administrations it would be to learn how to manage it (participation)" (Z.G)

One interviewee pointed out a problem of **corporative behaviour**:

"There is a problem, I believe, of not considering that space as a 'commons', as a common space, which is why all people work in their own areas of competence and hardly share it. And this is, in my opinion, a rather corporative attitude from a certain point of view, and it is possible to witness the corporative behaviour of NGOs, which often times try to guarantee their own political survival by holding on to their issues and also in economic-financial terms, thus trying to maintain a privileged relationship with those who provide sources of funding" (F.M.).

The difficulty of networking often stems from different visions of the subject, from the way to approach it, from the way to solve a given issue. Our interviewees note that as long as we deal with macro-issues and macro-objectives, we are able to talk and even achieve positive results. The greatest difficulties are found on specific issues.

An important difficulty is the **economic and organisational problems** in networking:

"Many times you just can' t do it. I followed very closely the birth of a network (…) and it took us two years to get things done for real, not so much for the urge to be at the centre of attention on the part of some, but precisely because we were caught up in a great daily work, it was difficult to put energies into another new path, not financed unsurprisingly… there I saw the difficulty, the lack of organisation, the difficulty of funds is enormous (…)" (A.G.).

Although there is a general agreement on the importance of networking to pursue one's own demands, there are also those who suggest that the i**nvestment of energy and money needed is not enough** in reality, showing that it is not really a priority for many:

"I would say that although everyone agrees that creating networks is important, useful, etc., maybe the truth is that, in the end, nobody really thinks so deep down; if organisations really needed it, if they really perceived its importance they would put some more money in a coordination office of the network they belong to, they would invest in this sense. Now, the economic dimension is not even the main issue, but it helps understand which the priorities are" (A.S.).

Networking is crucial but it also requires a considerable investment of energy and is sometimes facilitated by the association's ability to become a key player in its areas of work:

"It depends on how big you are. If we had a policy office of 10 people (…) we could work on multiple networks at the same time, but when there are just two of us we have to make a choice about which we consider to be the most relevant issues (…). On other issues, however, we just follow the lead and it's absolutely fine; for example, on the issue of landings, closed ports and so on, as we already have "Médecins Sans Frontières", "Open Arms" and "Tavolo asilo" – among others – ahead of us and it's totally fine to follow what they do and say. Everyone has exposure depending on the environment of civil society that they most participate in" (A.R.);

Other interviewees suggest that in order to overcome the obstacle of the central role played by certain organisations on given issues, it is sometimes better to focus on **smaller and *impromptu* networks** that bring together experts on specific and current issues, rather than creating permanent networks:

"I see that in the end, despite these investments on long-term networks, the things that work best are extemporaneous alliances with Amnesty on a certain issue, with the ICFTU on another issue for a specific campaign. So multiple, ad hoc actions on specific issues that are perhaps seen as less threatening for the identity and specific role of each one because they are ad hoc actions" (A.S.).

The use of **informal networks** of like-minded and policy-oriented organisations is also a preferred mode of collaboration according to another interviewee:

"From the classic, formal coordination systems of the 1990s and 2000s (…). There has been a shift to a more informal logic of like-minded groups which, however, invest a large part of their time in making political strategy. Maybe they don't have problems with challenging other aspects and other sectors of civil society that are more conservative or more business as usual and so on" (A.T.).

There is no lack of networks, but rather a lack of capacity to make an impact:

"We consider the issue of alliances to be a crucial one. We have always done so and will always do so. We have an endless list of networks and are always very careful in creating the right alliance for the issue we are dealing with, but at the same time we are convinced that alliances must be meaningful and functional to achieving our goals, which is why we are not interested in the mere number of acronyms we can mention" (Z.G).

One way to become more effective is to extend the collaboration to organisations that belong to different realities from one's own:

"We don't only network with associations that are similar to us. It is easy to talk to those who are similar to you. But it is then to have a dialogue with those who are more distant from you. So, to be in synergy with other types of actors, to do it with the authorities as much as with movements and with the academies. That's important because you look at reality from a wider perspective – a holistic approach is fundamental" (M.U.).

Some interviewees work to bring different actors together to combine both strengths and competences:

"(we put) together, on the one hand the knowledge of those who work on the field, (…) the knowledge of the academy, the knowledge of the experts etc., and we try to understand if (…) from this combination we can make an entity that if it were in another country would be called 'think and do', a place where people think and do; not only do we gather new information, but we also make proposals and promote collective actions" (A.M.).

Coalition building is important as a tool for civic engagement, even more so when extended to different types of actors. In addition to 'internal' civil society collaborations, our interviewees recognised the added value of multi-stakeholder collaborations that bring together different stakeholders, including civic organisations, professional organisations, trade unions, academia, etc.; this type of collaboration is certainly difficult to build, requiring not only a lot of time and energy but also a strong commitment from the actors involved. However, it is a powerful approach because it allows for more comprehensive and inclusive proposals to be made to the political decision-maker by speaking with one voice.

One interviewee mentions the example of a recent proposal for a law that managed to bring together some forty actors bringing together civil society and **trade unions**:

"a network of 40 subjects that for the first time also brought together pensioners' unions, an extraordinary fact that a union organisation decides to be equal in a relationship with other organisations to support a positive political lobby that advocates for something..." (A.M.).

On the campaign to stop the sale of weapons by the Italian government to Saudi Arabia and other members of the coalition to be used against Yemen, another interviewee explains the effectiveness of the work carried out in the network **involving the business world**:

"the public pressure, the hearings, the demonstrations, the press conferences, where we would try to get one more MP each time. And the importance of the constant work to get a clearer position from some groups. But it was also important to include in this coalition, for example, a plurality of subjects, including a committee for the re-foundation of a factory in Sardinia[13] to get out of the trap of work vs. rights. This convinced many." (R.D.).

In this sense, even Pope Francis is mentioned as an example of a catalyst subject who, from 2015 onwards, has brought together Catholic and secular associations for environmental campaigns:

"When 'Laudato sii' was issued we made a huge qualitative leap, for example in our relations with environmental movements; they immediately contacted us. And ot only the Italian, but also at international entities because they wanted to thank Pope Francis for 'Laudato sii' and therefore organise the march with Greenpeace, WWF, Legambiente etc. Since 2015 these relations have been maintained and are excellent" (A.S).

Although its fragmented nature persists, there are those among our interviewees who remark that the experience of being totally unprepared to deal with the shrinking of civic space has generated **its own antidote**:

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[13] Sardinia, Domusnovas, site of the factory where the aerial bombs produced by RWM Italy and destined for Yemen were produced.

"The tendency to increasingly split into groups is strong. However, especially in recent years, especially I would say, from 2016-2017, we have seen a great need for unity emerge in civil society. It has been understood that campaigns are done in coalition, in networks, through tables (…) it feels like the times and conditions are urgent to such an extent that they are an antidote to fragmentation, which was present several years ago. Everyone did their own campaigns, and then if they got together it was fine, otherwise they would carry on alone with their own contacts, fragmenting communications, dialogue and so on. But I feel optimistic" (R.D.).

This does not mean that the elements of fragility that seem to characterise civil society have disappeared:

"(…) because those who in recent years have built a role, a representation centred precisely on fragmentation and those who for example interpret their role as a sort of collusion or closeness to governments resist, as it is still a matter of power in a broad sense" (A.M.).

Rather, it points to the acquisition of greater awareness on the part of civil society:

"If one were to tell me what job I've been doing for the last three years I would say I've been a bridge builder basically, because that's the job I think it's crucial to do today" (A.M.).

Networks are sometimes seen as crucial to ease the burden of responsibility, especially when it comes to major initiatives:

"The more you are recognised, the more you are a key player, the more others expect something from you. But maybe if you cannot give that kind of answer, it is better to say no directly. Let's build that answer together because we are not able to do it alone" (M.U.).

Italian associations also operate European networks. From the point of view of political action, transnational networks are important above all because they allow the sharing of experiences and the exchange of political strategies between civil society organisations working on issues in countries and perhaps in more or less different conditions:

"transnational networks play a fundamental role (…) also because they offer the chance (in annual or triennial assemblies) to exchange ideas, practices, approaches, methodologies, strategies of intervention (…) and political-institutional dialectics" (V.A.).

For some interviewees, today, unlike in the past, the lack of human and economic resources severely limits their ability to engage in transnational issues, undermining their ability to form lasting and well-structured networks:

"in the end there is no one who can deal specifically with a campaign at European level, unless a project is approved, which very often, however, is a project and therefore has a beginning and an end, builds networks that fail to consolidate over time. There are obviously specific advocacy actions for which networking is easier; if you write an appeal, if you write an open

letter it is clear that you can easily network, but more structured initiatives are much more complex" (G.N.).

In spite of that, the comparison between national and transnational networks generally seems to show a higher level of satisfaction for the latter, both because they need more help and because of the concrete results achieved:

"We are inside European networks that are built by people who have a specific expertise, i.e. who specifically do that, and it's not by chance that it probably works a bit better". Afterwards, the EU is a dimension in which it is difficult to know how to move and to know who the interlocutors are. You don't know how to do it, which is also why probably network strategies work particularly well, because they help you to do things that you wouldn't know how to do alone (...). So I would say that being part of some networks, spending time in some environments, entering the European sphere, maybe with the help of others, because you wouldn't be able to do it alone, has a spin-off effect" (A.S.).

Another interviewee confirms that the strength of transnational networks also depends on the exchange of ideas and approaches because:

"They have a capacity to convey some requests in a homogeneous way and with the significance of the large number of associated organisations and also for the opportunity they offer in the annual or triennial meetings, for exchanges of ideas, practices, approaches, methodologies, strategies of direct intervention in support of women on the one hand, in the institutional political dialectic on the other, so we say that our association gives a lot of importance to the European and global network with participation also in moments of collective meeting" (A.V).

One interviewee recalls the role played by his association within a transnational campaign and the action carried out in Italy:

"All the work that was done (...) it constituted a precedent at global level, it was a European campaign where we played our part in Italy (...)" (A.T.).

On the other hand, a different kind of reflection, coming into contact with more difficult realities from a political point of view, leads to resize the gravity of the Italian events:

"(...) We have been part of the EU-RUSSIA Civil Society Forum for many years, so we have frequent and even friendly relations with many people in Russia, in Eastern Europe, so discussing the restriction of space for civil society in Italy is a bit complicated for me. This is because you see colleagues like yourself who tell you what is happening in Hungary, in Poland, in Russia, so I probably tend to minimise and downplay what has happened in Italy in this time frame that is being investigated. But this comes from this relationship... in short, it is strange to see people who do the same job as you in some ways and who experience problems on a level and scale totally incomparable to what you see, that is inevitable..." (A.S.).

Our interviewees recognise the **advantages offered by the European space** to Italian civil society, including the multiplicity of subjects with whom to build alliances, and as one interviewee observes, the different interests that come into conflict with each other can be exploited to advance the causes of civil society:

"On the European front, the situation in general is not much better but there is a big difference: both for the baroque way in which European governance has been built, so the multiplicity of actors etc., and for the shorter term opportunities that open up for the thousands of diversities that there are among the positions of the countries, among the various actors that even at the market level are clashing, in a naming-shaming that can be done even from one country to another etc.. There are still spaces left..." (A.T.).

In a way, what our interviewee is referring to is the practice of transnational monitoring that emerged from the Helsinki process during the Cold War. At that time, dissident movements in Eastern Europe exploited reports on the implementation of the agenda of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe to improve the state of human rights in their own countries, pivoting on their international visibility (Chiodi, 2021, p. 250).

Transnational political action is effective in putting pressure on governments or national institutions that violate human rights or make discriminatory decisions. As one of our interviewees recalls:

"When there is a problem in a country, which is a problem of absence of laws or bodies, the pressure of the other Assembly sections of the European Union on the government is always effective." (R.D.).

Italian civil society makes less use of this transnational space than it could in its work in the field: only a few of the interviewees we spoke to showed that they knew how to operate at this level.

We will now review the strategies adopted by Italian civil society organisations to understand how to increase their resilience.

4. Strategies for political action

With the weakening of the Italian party system and the general fragility of the political class, the action of civil society takes on a particularly relevant importance and significance; as one of our interviewees put it:

"Today we are surrounded every day by completely different situations that need politics that is still lacking, so if you introduce yourself as a subject that reflects on how to do things, which studies, makes competent proposals and tries to do political mediation you are recognised, regardless of what you actually did. Let's put it this way, I think our success is also due to this"(A.M.).

Civil society thus becomes a sort of political mediator able to step in and fill the gaps left by institutional politics. In order to do this, civil society actors in their work for the protection of fundamental rights resort to different intervention strategies, from the most traditional, such as campaigns or demonstrations, to the most innovative, such as strategic litigation, often combining them to achieve greater impact:

"We mainly do advocacy activities and direct intervention in changing our reality, which is after all our first objective: to channel civic activism into actions that change the reality in a way that improves quality of life, the supply of public services and so on" (A.N.).

4.1 Dialogue with institutions

The search for dialogue with institutions is undoubtedly the central part of civil society's political action. As the experience of the organisations interviewed shows, Parliament is the institution that offers the greatest mechanisms for the political participation of civil society. The work takes place not only through contacts with individual MPs or groups of MPs but mainly through consultations and hearings in the different committees where civil society organisations can make recommendations, opinions or assessments.

An important channel of dialogue with the parliament is represented by the national coordination tables, such as the National Asylum Table or the National Anti-Violence Table, through which civil society works with groups of parliamentarians who are more sensitive to the issue in question and can put forward amendments to specific bills or proposals:

"When a bill that is of interest to us is under discussion, we do the whole work of proposing amendments, so we work with groups of parliamentarians who act as spokespersons for our demands, we work on amendments that are then presented by them" (V.C.).

In addition to proposing amendments, civil society organisations often put forward well-structured and comprehensive bills to fill the legislative gap:

"We also sometimes make structured bills which we try to share in parliament (...). In that case, the dialogue in parliament with the relevant committees does not generally concern a single aspect, but a bill that is accepted and adopted by parliament.
This is the attempt we make when we realise that, without our intervention, there would be no organic policy on the matter and there would be a risk of many «buffer» measures" (A.N.).

As one of our interviewees suggests, at a time of weakness and lack of content on the part of politics, presenting well-defined, analytical proposals with a clear and structured feasibility plan is an element that can facilitate the work of civil society, making the success of political action more likely:

"The fact of working together on proposals that are not generic yet very analytical represents at this moment a strength in the dialogue with the institutions" (A.N.).

While it is true that coming to parliament with "closed" proposals facilitates civil society's political action, this practice is also a symptom of a certain lack of confidence in the political class, which is often considered to be not very competent, if not incapable, of intervening in certain issues:

"Often it is not enough to give them the ideas (...), you have to give them turnkey projects, because if you let the idea be declined, it will be ruined in so doing" (A.M.);

"We also have taken a much more conservative attitude, so we are very cautious to ask for reform because you never know. They put their hands on it (...) and you never know what they might end up doing (...)" (A.S.).

Sometimes it happens that parliament itself involves civil society in committees or working groups set up *ad hoc*. This is what happened, for example, in the case of a commission set up by the former president of the Chamber of Deputies Laura Boldrini, which brought together parliamentarians and representatives of civil society to conduct an investigation into the spread of hatred on and off the web:

"It was a commission that was an exemplary experience (...) because there was a choice to constitute a mixed commission that included parliamentarians and representatives of civil society in launching an investigation that then led to the publication of a report dedicated to the spread of hate online and offline" (G.N.).

In addition to parliament, ministries sometimes also consult civil society. This year, for instance, the Ministry for Universities and Research launched online public consultations for the elaboration of the National Research Programme 2021-2027, in which various stakeholders, from civil society organisations to academia and trade unions, participated (FRA, 2021, p. 46).

As one of our interviewees suggests, in order for the dialogue with political representatives to lead to the expected results, it is important to nurture a direct, stable, constant relationship:

"If you hear from them once every two, three years they forget about you too and rightly so, with all the people they hear from. But if you create a stable dialogue, which is constant and pursues a certain issue assiduously and consistently and requires some transparency and accountability etc., then the politician gets used to it too" (A.R.).

From the interviews conducted, it emerges the importance of structuring political action on several levels, from local to national to European and international, depending on the circumstance. In this sense, working at the local level is also important, because, as one interlocutor suggests, it is 'grassroots democracy' that makes it possible to be effective thanks to a more direct relationship with political decision-makers:

"In grassroots democracies it is much easier to affect mechanisms because you have a direct relationship with the territory and the political decision-makers, and that is where changes often take place, in neighbourhoods, in town halls, where there is this direct correspondence between who is elected and the area they represent" (F.M).

Depending on the issue the organisation deals with, it is more or less possible to create cross-cutting political alliances. For example, issues such as gender violence or environmental protection may favour alliances with representatives of various political forces in the constitutional arc. On the other hand, for other usually more polarised issues, first and foremost migration, it is more difficult to identify parliamentarians from the centre-right in the construction of intergroups or cross-party initiatives to pursue common initiatives.

4.2 Awareness-raising campaigns

As several interviewees stressed, the effectiveness of political action also depends on the communication activities that go hand in hand with work within the institutions:

"We have very much backed up the parliamentary process publicly with a big communication effort. We have always supported our lobbying campaigns with a very strong public action because we are also interested in their penetrating public opinion and becoming a subject of debate in the newspapers, on the media and on social networks, so we have always provided them with data, elements, dossiers, reports, images, in short, all the tools that could also involve civil society" (Z.G.)

Complaint or awareness-raising campaigns remain a fairly widespread political practice among civil society, seeking to guide public opinion and indirectly direct decision-makers in the public policies to be adopted or modified.

As several interviewees suggest, campaigns are often more effective when carried out by a network of organisations. Therefore, the first step in planning a campaign is to:

"To dialogue with our fellow travellers, to try and have, as far as possible, a common positioning, after which, having established common positions on political issues, to define the communication strategy and therefore also visibility, a division of labour on the institutions and political staff to be involved, important events that draw attention at least once a year or two" (A.R.).

This is a job that requires time, energy and resources, especially because each campaign is different and has to be designed ad hoc to reach the target and the goal:

"Depending also on the political responses (at the launch of the campaign), one decides more for a campaign of contrast and denunciation or for a campaign that opens a dialogue, a debate and tries to enter also in the matter of the change of some regulations, of some institutional behaviours" (A.R.).

In many cases, campaigns are organised to support other political actions, such as strategic litigation, and help to create a counter-narrative and open up political spaces into which other actors can enter:

"Our idea of change through campaigns sees us more as people who open political spaces, open cracks in this system, so that other actors can come forward, (...) we hope to open spaces, to trigger processes" (A.T.).

4.3 Civic monitoring

A considerable part of civil society political action focuses on monitoring the correct application of the law by public authorities. In a country where the focus is on producing legislation, as one interviewee points out, the implementation of commitments is not adequately taken into account:

"What is somehow missing in government institutions in our country is monitoring and verification of the actions that are put in place from time to time, so there is no control of what is then somehow implemented" (V.A.).

Civil society therefore takes on the task of watchdog, even though this work can become exhausting over time

"The example for us might be represented by the hundreds of hours of work per year: fighting against what the Questura does (...), always the same things, always the same things against the law, it is not that we are the ones who reach for the moon, we have to constantly monitor the work of the Questura (...), so hours of lawyers, lawsuits, letters to the ministry, letters to the Questura, tables with the Questura to solve things that are written and must be done like this. (...). It is a waste of time and energies, (...) it becomes frustrating at a certain point because you are always focused on the same thing which never seems to end, and you realise that the work you do is useless from a certain point of view" (V.C.).

For many organisations, the monitoring work is not only limited to national laws but also to European regulations and the commitments made by Italy in international fora such as the Council of Europe and the United Nations. In fact, several of the organisations interviewed use European and international law or tools offered by supranational bodies to put pressure on national institutions: collaboration with special rapporteurs, drafting of shadow reports, use of reports by the European Commission, the FRA, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), the Council of Europe or the United Nations, are all transnational political action initiatives used to bring about change at national level.

One of the most significant examples is the drafting of a shadow report on Italy's compliance with the Istanbul Convention to which an Italian association committed to combating violence against women contributed.

As our interviewee explains, to carry out this task, the association worked in close collaboration with the special rapporteurs of the independent Group of Experts

of the Council of Europe in charge of monitoring members' compliance with the Convention (GREVIO)[14], participating in the visit of European experts and facilitating the meeting with their Italian counterparts:

"We published the GREVIO report in January 2020 and we also had to fight for its translation into Italian in order to get people to know it; (the report) is continuously quoted in our press releases showing how the Istanbul Convention was not only disregarded, but how the institutions themselves continue to disregard the GREVIO recommendations made to Italy" (V.A.).

Another case that was mentioned during the interviews concerns the involvement of Italian civil society organisations in the elaboration of the new plan against racism which ECRI urged UNAR to promote, an involvement enthusiastically welcomed by civil society:

"In this case, the European obligations were quite favourable to us" (A.G.).

Some Italian civil society associations have consultative status with international organisations such as the UN or are members of civil society fora that support institutions in their work of monitoring international obligations.

4.4 Strategic litigation

Among the advocacy strategies presented by our interviewees, the most innovative is certainly that of strategic litigation, which one of our interviewees defined as:

"The new frontier of civil society, both in Italy and internationally" (R.D).

Strategic litigation in the field of fundamental rights aims, through legal action, to fill gaps in existing legislation and bring about political and social changes that go beyond the individual case under examination. This strategy helps to bring the attention of the public and especially of policy-makers to particular cases of injustice or human rights violations by lobbying for policies, laws or practices to be introduced, annulled or changed, as appropriate.

Many civil society organisations have started to adopt this strategy and have been able to achieve important political results. A recent case in point is the blocking of weapons delivery from Italy to Saudi Arabia. As one interviewee explains, in this case the strategic dispute was one of the tools for successful advocacy:

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[14] Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence

"When the Conte 2 government stopped weapons supplies to Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, that was a successful campaign. And it was carried out with a range of tools, including court litigation" (R.D.).

Several of our interviewees mentioned appeals to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) as one of the advocacy actions carried out through European and international law. Appeals to the ECHR can be used for advocacy purposes for two main reasons. On the one hand, because ECHR judgements can provide, in addition to compensation to the victim, an obligation for governments to amend their domestic legislation in accordance with European standards, thus becoming an effective instrument of political pressure on national institutions.

On the other hand, because these judgments mean that the condemned country is placed under closer monitoring by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe until it has complied with the judgment, thus allowing civil society, in the role of amicus curiae, to act as watchdog and provide new documentation to push:

"The Committee of Ministers not to close the procedure, reiterating its demands to the Italian government" (V.A.).

One of the most emblematic and successful examples is undoubtedly the Torreggiani judgement, which in 2013 condemned Italy for treatment considered inhuman and degrading to some prisoners, becoming a de facto pilot judgment on the problem of prison overcrowding. The judgement not only imposed an obligation on Italy to pay compensation to the plaintiffs, but also added a duty to make structural reforms to penitentiary institutions to address the problem of overcrowding, thus leading to a result that benefited not only the individuals involved in the case, but the entire prison population.

Despite the fact that strategic litigation can also bring excellent results at the policy level, as in the case of the Torreggiani ruling, maintaining these results over time is a problem that should not be underestimated. As one of our interviewees points out:

"The Torreggiani ruling was a pilot one so at a certain point the Court (...) put Italy under evaluation for one year with respect to the issue of overcrowding, but almost 8 years have passed and we are more or less back to the levels we had before, so it is always a constant work, you scratch a little bit the surface and then you have to start again. Sometimes we even get some good victories, the thing is to maintain them over time" (V.C.).

Judicial litigation is a technique that has also been successfully adopted at the local level as the example of the civic mobilisation in Lodi that took place between 2017 and 2018 shows. In response to a regulation introduced by the municipal council regarding access to certain social services – including school transport, canteens, and access to public nurseries – which introduced discriminatory regulations against non-EU families, opposition councillors took action and, with the help of experts from the associations ASGI and NAGA, filed a lawsuit with the Civil Court of Milan. This initial action was followed by initiatives by the Coordinamento Uguali Doveri, born out of the activism of a number of Lodi citizens, including public demonstrations and an important fund-raising campaign in favour of the foreign families affected by the regulation.

As one of our interviewees explained, the greatest success of the joint activity of the opposition councillors and the Coordinamento – in addition to winning the court case and obtaining the annulment of the regulation – was above all that it served as an example for other realities that were experiencing a similar situation:

"The lawsuit we won implied also that in the other municipalities someone woke up and decided to appeal – either they changed the regulation before going to court, or they lost in the first instance and changed the regulation after the first instance and never introduced a similar regulation again. I am proud of the fact that what we did in Lodi did not end up in Lodi, what we did in Lodi had effects in all those towns and cities that were not microscopic, where this thing had already passed or was passing, it had also passed in a consortium of centre-left municipalities in the south of Milan, but they withdrew it after Lodi had had that outcome".

In addition to strategic litigation, dialogue with parliament, campaigns and monitoring – which are the strategies used in most cases – other methods of political action by civil society include, for example, petitions – which are, however, considered an overstretched tool:

"There was a historical period, four or five years ago, when petitions were doing great and were also relatively successful, but with the proliferation of petitions (...) and the inflation of this tool, unfortunately its ability to move, in this case, political and institutional interests dropped" (A.S.).

Of course, the instruments include demonstrations but also research and analysis of public policies. As one of our interviewees puts it, in the field of immigration for example, doing research means doing a sort of:

"Indirect activism, guided by research (...) never aimed at itself but with an immediate social and cultural impact" aimed at *"unmasking and deconstructing a series of mystifications, lies (...) false perceptions. In the face of this scientific work we always ask a political representative to expose himself at the end"* (L.S.).

Other modes of political action, such as non-violent action or civil disobedience, which are especially common in the Anglo-Saxon world, are still "the prerogative of a few civil society organisations" in Italy and struggle to gain consensus and political space:

"Today, the practices of civil disobedience (...) which are very Anglo-Saxon and also a novelty in our country and are now finally able to penetrate the media, it seems to me that we still have some difficulty in creating consensus (...) therefore, an organization that enters with that kind of modality has difficulties". (F.M.).

From a certain point of view, the experience of Lodi in 2018 in its initial phase was also an example of civil disobedience from which originated a civic mobilisation formalised in the Coordinamento Uguali Doveri able to carry out a very successful political action of pressure on local institutions.

The episode that triggered the entire mobilisation, in fact, was the decision of some families of the Egyptian community in Lodi not to send their children to school for the first three days of the school year in protest against the new discriminatory regulations, a decision that was followed by a protest in the town hall square and led to the creation of the Coordinamento Uguali Doveri.

4.5 Features of successful political action

Thanks to the political action strategies described above, over the years Italian civil society has managed to achieve some important results that show how much civic action is capable of affecting the political sphere. Among the examples of relevant political actions that we have collected, there was the pressure exerted by civil society on the occasion of the 2001 constitutional reform that introduced, in the last paragraph of article 118, the principle of subsidiarity of civic action by individual and associated citizens[15].

The constant element that links the examples given by our interlocutors is undoubtedly the time duration of political action, which often requires a **prolonged commitment and a lot of tenacity**:

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[15] Article 118, last paragraph, of the Constitution as amended by the *Constitutional Law Modifications to Title V of Part Two of the Constitution* of 2001: "State, Regions, Metropolitan Cities, Provinces and Municipalities shall favour the autonomous initiative of citizens, both individual and associated, to perform activities of general interest, on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity".

"There are human rights campaigns that took 28 years; for example the one to introduce the crime of torture. There is a campaign for the introduction of identification codes for the police and public order services which started massively on the 10th anniversary of Genoa, so 10 years ago. And it still doesn't get any results. It took at least 4 years to stop weapons exports to Saudi Arabia. Also to increase the rights of vulnerable groups – the DDL Zan law – if I think that at the beginning of all this there is the DDL Scalfarotto, which belongs to so many legislatures ago..." (R.D.).

Similarly in the case of environmental policies:

"The law on ecological offences was approved in Italy in 2015, but we had been asking for that law since 94, we never stopped asking for it year after year – 20 years of requests, so we are also quite tenacious and patient in waiting for results" (Z.G).

Apart from the organisations' perseverance, another element that has often helped to achieve important goals is, as mentioned above, the ability to **combine different political actions**. In the case of the law to introduce the crime of torture, adopted by Italy only in 2017, the associations involved reported adopting different advocacy practices, from collecting signatures for the popular law initiative to letters to parliamentarians and public initiatives.

In addition, **communication** and the creation of a narrative focused on people's **personal stories** played a key role:

"I think that if there hadn't been those faces, if there hadn't been the photos of Stefano Cucchi, if there hadn't been his family with a great communicative capacity (...), if for a period there hadn't been a convergence of family members available to continue with the investigations on their bodies – I don't know how else to say it – it would have been different. So I believe that trying (...) to tell people's stories... Giulio Regeni, Patrick Zaki, talking about people's stories makes you relate to them (...); if you slowly manage to shift the collective orientation towards the issues that these stories concern, you are more likely to make politics interested in actually acting in that direction" (interview with V.C).

Communication centred on the stories of the subjects was one of the winning strategies also in the case of the often-mentioned experience of Lodi, undoubtedly one of the most positive and successful examples of grassroots mobilisation in recent years. In this case the activation strategies were different and included, as described above, both a form of civil disobedience and legal action.

What was created in response to the discriminatory regulation of the municipality of Lodi was also a true **cross-cutting alliance** that included representatives of political parties, opposition municipal councillors, social workers, cultural mediators and, of course, the families of the foreign communities affected by the regulation. As our interviewee points out:

"I don't know what happened and made possible the way in which this battle unfolded, I do know that it was so clear to everyone how important it was to achieve the goal (…) working in a very competitive way out of necessity, differences were put aside and the common denominator that was clear, evident and specific was the main focus. (…) There really were these different levels, Italian and foreign, institutional and non-institutional, belonging to associations, parties or collectives and individuals" (M.F.).

In the transversality of the actors involved in Lodi, there were **individual volunteers, informal groups and structured organisations** such as Caritas, united to respond to the practical needs of the Coordinamento Uguali Doveri, such as having a physical space to receive families to help them fill in the documents required to access school services.

The support and collaboration of the **political representatives** was also essential. As our interlocutor recalls, they were a very active part of the movement, and worked with commitment both inside and outside the municipal council, participating in the initiatives and meetings of the Coordinamento:

"The example of the experience of the Coordinamento is the experience of how much there is a mutual need for the politics done in the institutions of what happens outside the institutions, and for those who are outside the palace, out of choice, kinship, because they are not interested in playing other roles, how important it is that in the institution there is someone who looks outside and embraces the requests of those who are outside, not only during the election campaign, not only because it is written that it must be done. (…) The alliance between the inside and the outside was absolute, what was done inside was agreed with those who were outside and what was done outside was done to support what was done inside, and it went on like that from the first to the last day" (M.F.).

Another example often recalled by the interviewees concerns the work done on the citizenship reform law, a work that involved several civil society organisations:

"We were many organisations, that campaign was not born out of the blue, it was born from a real need; the G2 association of second generations was there, promoting the campaign. In the second phase, so after the deposition of the proposal in Parliament, an informal movement was born: Italians without citizenship" (G.N.).

The advocacy work, which **began outside the institutions** with the creation of national committees to collect signatures for the reform bill, then **continued inside Parliament**:

"The campaign went on at all levels. I remember that the former President of the Republic Napolitano expressed his support, and the Presidents of the two chambers expressed their support. We met all the institutions that could support the good outcome of the parliamentary debate." (G.N.).

Also in this case, the commitment within the institution was accompanied by a strong communicative action that sought to put the protagonists, the second generations of migrants, at the centre of attention:

"There was a very strong media work, also quite effective in which among other things especially in the second phase there was an attempt to give voice to young people, so-called second generation" (G.N.).

Despite the fact that the advocacy campaign did not achieve its objective, one of our interviewees underlined its positive aspects, i.e. its ability to **affect the public debate, to launch a cultural challenge**:

"In the phase in which the campaign worked, it worked a lot on the level of the ability to reorient the public debate in the direction of the guarantee of rights, starting from a previous phase in which, quite differently, the public debate was merely dominated by the management of migration policies. Therefore, we can say that in that phase it was a great cultural challenge that was won. It was won, let's say, also in the whole process that almost led to its approval; only the last step in the Senate was not completed" (G.N.).

4.6 The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP)

The participation of civil society in the decision-making process is not always to be taken for granted. In fact, as one of our interviewees pointed out, the spaces for participation are not always recognised, and it often happens that they are only created after strong pressure from civil society itself. This is the case, for example, of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) whereby Italy has the opportunity to invest over 200 billion euros, including grants and loans, which will be received from the NextGenerationEU, the plan introduced by the European Commission to support the economic recovery of the EU affected by the pandemic.

The plan presented last April by the Italian government and approved by the Commission and the EU Council for Economic Affairs (ECOFIN) has long been at the

centre of public debate, and has attracted criticism not only from various political forces but also from a large portion of Italian civil society, which has complained about the lack of transparency and inclusion in decision-making processes:

"We had asked – and would have appreciated – along with many other associations, to participate in the decision-making process, just as the government consulted Confindustria and various others, we think they at least should have consulted the organised world of upstream associations. Unfortunately, that did not happen" (Z.G.).

In response to the Italian government's behaviour, the main civil society organisations working on transparency and civic lobbying issues took steps to ensure that the government recognised their role at least in the implementation phase of the plan. These organisations have set up the coalition Osservatorio Civico PNRR (NRRP Civic Observatory), which brings together more than 30 Italian civil society organisations with the aim of monitoring the implementation of the NRRP and encouraging the inclusion of the areas that will have to manage the implementation of the planned projects; as one of our interviewees points out in fact:

"60% of the NRRP resources will be allocated at regional level, so governance at territorial level will be fundamental" (A.M.).

For the representative of one of the associations promoting the Osservatorio Civico, the task that civil society must perform in implementing the plan is clear: on the one hand, civil society will have to monitor the correct use of funds, thus:

"To understand where the investments are, to denounce the wrong ones and to verify that the right ones are implemented in the best possible way" (Z.G.).

and contribute, where possible, to the design of those interventions that are not yet defined in detail. On the other hand, it will have to play the role of "technical supervisor", monitoring the implementation of the infrastructures needed to carry out the projects, because as our interviewee explains:

"The NRRP, on some issues, necessarily provides for the construction of industrial plants, in the field of recycling, waste, renewable sources… spending that money by 2026 without public participation is impossible. For example, the NRRP on the circular economy says that it will put 1.5 billion for material recovery plants, in particular for the recycling of organic waste, which is an excellent claim and an excellent investment. But where, how, what technologies, when, our partners, and everything else needs to be built, so here we see the second pillar of participation" (Z.G.).

Last summer the first positive results of the advocacy work arrived with the approval of the amendment proposed by the Observatory in the Governance and Simplification Decree of 26 July to guarantee the participation of active citizenship organisations in the NRRP's permanent economic, social and territorial partnership table:

"In the last decree on the simplification of governance that was forwarded along with the NRRP we proposed an amendment so that civil society and civic activism organisations would also be included in the Partnership Table, which is one of the monitoring bodies that the NRRP provides for, so the amendment was aimed at recognising the category of civic activism organisations within this Partnership Table that should dialogue with the Presidency of the Council of Ministers in order to be able to monitor the progress of the NRRP" (A.N.).

On the other hand, a second amendment, also put forward by the Observatory and concerning the proposal to set up an online platform where all NRRP data would be made open and accessible, so as to ensure maximum transparency in the implementation phase, was not accepted. The request made by the Osservatorio Civico was actually quite simple and did not require the creation of any particular mechanism: civil society organisations simply asked that the information shared with public administrations through the ReGiS platform, already provided for in the NRRP, be opened up and made accessible to all.

One of our interviewees believes that the reason for the failure to accept the amendment is linked to the fact that **monitoring is still perceived as a hindrance** by politicians rather than a resource, precisely because Italy still lacks a consolidated tradition of transparency and access to data:

"The role of organisations that monitor, report, ask for transparency of data is always experienced with suspicion, annoyance, so those spaces are still very difficult to obtain now. (...) The amendment did not pass. The FOIA (Freedom of Information Act, ed.) and everything related to open data are really recent achievements for our country, there is no tradition in this sense and it is still hard to enforce this openness and this action of collaboration with citizens. They are still experienced as an obstacle rather than a resource." (A.N.).

The many strategies of political action and the examples given so far confirm the dynamism and diversification of Italian civil society highlighted by the European Commission in its Reports on the Rule of Law (EC 2020, 2021).

The effectiveness of civil society activity, however, also depends on the resources available to pursue the various demands at public level. At the national level there is a lack of significant funding lines to support the work of organisations, especially those working in the area of fundamental rights. Based on the experience of our interviewees, in the next section we look at the sources of funding used by civil society to implement their initiatives.

5. Funding

"One of the central issues affecting the work of civil society and, indirectly, its relationship with politics is undoubtedly the availability of adequate funds and resources. In this sense, the economic and financial crisis of 2008-2012 is highlighted as a key moment to understand the difficulties faced in recent years" (A.T.).

In its 2018 report, the European Agency for Fundamental Rights warns that the limited availability of funds, as well as difficulties in accessing existing funding streams, are among the main challenges hindering the work of civil society and encourages all member countries to ensure adequate funding for organisations committed to the protection of fundamental rights, democracy and the rule of law (FRA, 2018).

Fundraising is an important part of the work of organisations that requires more and more time and energy. As several interviewees complain, in Italy institutions do not make available significant funds to support the functioning of associations dealing with fundamental rights:

"I think it is essentially a problem that concerns everyone; Italy is not a country that funds social issues (…) funding is sought for as if it was a lost horizon, which does not give any vigour to social issues. This should not be the case, especially in a country that makes social work a great response to the lack of a more institutional level. Often times the associations compensate for what the institutions do not do. That is why, exactly because you are giving us limited role, you really cannot leave us behind" (M.U.).

In Italy, apart from some calls for proposals by UNAR and the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), there is a lack of significant national funding lines on human rights. As one interviewee notes, the absence of adequate resources on the one hand, and political coverage on the other, risks rendering civil society's work ineffective:

"Unlike in the Anglo-Saxon or Northern European countries where there are other funding streams (…) those who are not big enough to invest and increase their budgets with fundraising like the big players, pretty much without political coverage and affiliation, know very little about how to fund themselves and can only rely on volunteering and activism, which is also becoming somewhat outdated (…) it creates that background noise that, frankly speaking, doesn't bother those in power at all" (A.T.)

One of the limitations arising from the scarcity of national funds and the consequent privileged relationship with the European institutions is that they often aim to create alliances between organisations from member states in order to strengthen the European public space. However, it is clear that the creation of national networks is also important in order to have an impact on the Italian context:

"The European and transnational networks that are formed for civil rights, for migrants' rights, for human rights certainly in our opinion are a great resource, but with this risk, that being transnational... the risk is that national issues are a bit fragmented, meaning that the perspective is more transnational" (L.S.).

Given the limited financial resources at national level, it is not surprising that the three main sources of funding that most organisations have in common are European funds, self-financing and contributions from private individuals.

5.1 EU support

For almost all interviewees, European calls for proposals are one of the main sources of funding for their association. In the absence of significant funding streams at national level, the funds made available by the EU, mainly through the Commission's Directorates General or its Agencies, are fundamental to ensure the sustainability of Italian civil society: as one interviewee points out, European resources often make it possible to implement real *"work programmes"* rather than *"one-off projects"* which allow for a certain stability and continuity even in the long term (A.N.). As another interviewee confirms:

"It is a type of funding that allows you to do 3-4 year projects because they are call for proposals where there is a considerable budget. The funding from the EU cannot be matched by other donors" (E.P.).

For many Italian civil society organisations, European projects have an important political significance and the realisation of a European project can be the first step towards the institutionalisation of intervention methodologies that would otherwise struggle to be recognised at a political level:

"For us, the European project is not only funding, but sometimes it is the channel through which we manage to better develop and above all to have recognised some ideas that for the association are technically valid but would not be recognised, so we believe a lot in this tool, also politically, it is not only a way to get funding" (Z.G.).

However, for many organisations, especially small and medium-sized ones, access to these funds has become increasingly difficult over the years, on the one hand because competition has increased and, on the other hand, because the criteria and requirements of the institutions have become more and more stringent and selective:

"Over the years, compared to the second half of the 1990s, it has undergone enormous transformations, even European project planning has become very complex and requires very high professionalism, there is a lot of competition, there is a lot of bureaucracy" (G.N.);

"The European Commission has raised the bar more and more and so you have to ensure results all the time, which means numbers, how many millions of people you have involved, how many tens of thousands of activists etc." (A.R.).

This has obviously favoured larger organisations that are able to devote resources and energy to strengthening their project work and creating alliances with national and European partners:

"In recent years, many of these organisations, and I am talking about the larger ones, have really turned into "project factories"(…). Obviously, the big ones are more structured and have outstanding systems in place for communication, communication for fundraising, for planning, for the various dimensions such as small donors, big donors, testamentary legacies; if we were to see in their balance sheets how much they invest in this stuff, I think it would be a huge part of their annual management" (V.C.);

"For a bigger company, there is more space in this regard. It's unfair for a small organisation to have to struggle or become part of another bigger association because you can't get the funds. (…) there is a great need to look instead at inland areas, at more peripheral areas and at smaller associations, because in the end they are the ones that manage to get to where there are really problems to be tackled" (M.U.)

Timing is another factor that makes it difficult for smaller organisations to work with European funds:

"The other big problem with European projects is that you may be allocated the project, but then you get the funds if you draft a good project, so there is a difference between the moment when you win the project, when you carry out the actions, and the moment when Europe will recognise them economically, so you need to have a structure that can "bear" European projects" (Z.G.).

This is also evident in the experience of a large Italian association, for which participation in European calls for proposals and projects was fundamental in order to establish itself not only at national level but also at European level. If the association had not had a consolidated structure that allowed it to invest in planning, it would have been very difficult to take advantage of European funds:

"There is a very important technical part, that is true, so much so that in recent years we have made many sacrifices to structure a very large project planning office that deals with the writing, reporting and technical monitoring of the project in execution (…) clearly this is a greater economic investment. (…) I agree that if you don't have such a strong structure, you can't participate in European projects and benefit from all the advantages also in terms of

contents and relations, (...) if we didn't have such a well-prepared structure, we would never have done it" (Z.G.).

The European institutions are certainly aware of this problem, which is why calls for proposals that include a regranting option, a type of indirect financial contribution in which organisations that are able to access the calls for proposals become the intermediaries between the EU and smaller civil society organisations, have become increasingly common in recent years:

"The European Commission and recently also the Italian Agency for Cooperation have adopted another technique which is regranting. They know that the decision to raise the bar involves the exclusion of many small associations, which are on the territory and cannot access it, so to overcome this problem they decide to fund – in the case of the European Commission there is a specific lot – the projects of small associations through re-donation" (A.R.).

More than one association reports having already experimented with this technique. This is the case, for example, of a recent project on climate change implemented by an association in Milan thanks to EU funding, in which the role of the association was precisely to:

"Play the role of donor for three/four years and create calls for ideas, calls for innovation or other ways to give grants, assign a financial contribution, to small and medium-sized civil society organisations that by their nature do not get European funding, because they probably do not have the financial solidity, do not have the structure, do not have the staff, cannot handle millions of euros, but they have this great ability to reach not only the territory, but also the community of reference, so they are able to involve the population of that specific territory, whether it be a neighbourhood, a village, a city, a province, or a group of municipalities" (E.P.)

While the regranting option helps institutions to reach out to grassroots associations and have a greater impact at local level, this practice is not devoid of contradictions: for some stakeholders, it runs the risk of distorting the work of organisations, which are forced to take on the task of organising calls for proposals and managing all the bureaucracy involved:

"There are those who say that in this way the European Commission has delegated the bureaucracy of calls for proposals to the NGOs themselves, like us, who at this point have had to invent the bureaucracy to manage a call for proposals; so on the one hand it ensures the distribution of funding in the territories, but on the other hand you find yourself in a role that is not exactly yours (...). We had never made calls for tenders, we have never considered ourselves civil society associations that should have the role of distributing funding in the territories, but we have to do this as well. Very recently, the Italian Agency for Development

Cooperation has introduced the regranting method and even Italian regions have started to do regranting, which is crazy because if even at territorial level you can't make a call for tenders in your territory and have to delegate someone else...this is a growing difficulty too, it certainly doesn't help" (A.R.).

There is no doubt that European funds are fundamental for the work of civil society in the protection of fundamental rights. The interviewees highlight the opportunities arising from the relationship with the EU several times during the interviews.

On the other hand, some interviewees underline the fact that when European funds are managed indirectly, i.e. they are distributed by national authorities, Italian civil society often loses autonomy and operational capacity:

"The trouble is that for many years now these European funds have increasingly been managed by the government, i.e. by ministries, which have competences on migration policies. I am talking about this specific case, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Labour basically share competences on migration and integration of migrants. These governmental structures, which are the expression of the governments, are entrusted with the management of European funds, so whoever wants to plan and win European funds, which are one of the major channels of livelihood for the Third Sector, does so through the ministries, and must pass through the judgment and assessment of the governmental expression. This has undoubtedly contributed to weakening the role of advocacy, the role of complaint that the third sector had for policies, because, to put it bluntly, if the third sector is also economically dependent on the ministries and therefore on governments, its critical work or its criticism of the policies that the governments themselves put in place has certainly diminished, because it is not in anyone's interest to create a contrast, to take a critical stance towards those who manage the money you need to survive. So this has meant that the action of complaint, of advocacy has weakened a lot, and when it has weakened a lot it has contributed indirectly to the fact that those narratives a bit xenophobic and anti-immigrants have taken root without a strong critical impact from the third sector itself" (L.S.).

This situation also helps to explain the difficulty in responding to the shrinking civic space of recent years. Closeness with the donor constitutes an obvious limit to the action of control and criticism by civil society on the donor.

This problem of dependence on the donor, and therefore the difficulty of expressing a critical view of the donor, is also evident in the case of organisations that rely on regional or local funds. The closer the donor, the greater the risk of dependence when dealing with issues relating to the work of the public administration itself.

As one interlocutor points out, the solution could come from a political-institutional agreement between the institutions that fund civil society at various levels:

"There should be a real multi-level agreement. (...) It's an inter-institutional problem, to ensure that these institutions have a common approach at least among themselves, that is shared, not each one on its own; in fact, the European Commission launches its big calls for proposals, the national agency launches its own, the region launches some, the municipalities do the same, and as associations we find ourselves in the middle of this institutional chaos, and depending on our capacities we try to get involved somewhere. The problem is political and institutional, there is no systemic idea of the importance of civil society space" (A.R.).

If the role of civil society were acknowledged in a systematic way, the various donors would sponsor activities unrelated to their own work and even cross-finance to avoid conflicts of interest.

In any case, the possibility of drawing on several donors increases the room for action of associations, which can thus operate without being constrained by financial dependence.

5.2 Self-funding

If Italian civil society has emancipated itself from the relationship of political subordination to the parties that it had in the so-called 'First Republic', it is clear that new forms of dependence have emerged. It is no coincidence that European funds are often the most appreciated, given the distance of political action between donor and beneficiary.

It is therefore not surprising that in order to maintain their autonomy, some civil society organisations choose not to accept public funds, preferring instead to focus on self-financing or fundraising from private entities.

The capacity for autonomous fundraising amongst private individuals increases the margin of autonomy and the ability to express critical positions towards institutions. However, not all organisations are able to achieve a sufficient number of members to ensure such financial autonomy. Moreover, few national organisations are able to raise significant funds through membership or membership fees or through private donations or legacies.

Self-funding through fundraising remains the weakness of many associations that only in recent years have started to engage in fundraising activities in a more structured way. Obviously, as one of our interviewees points out, communication skills are the determining factor for effective fundraising:

"Self-funding works if you have great communication skills and can address a very large

audience. Otherwise it risks becoming a trap. If you rely only on what you collect, you do little in the end. (...) When I look at the ranking of donations through the 5 x mille, it is evident that the organisations dealing with healthcare – and we will see after the pandemic how much more marked this phenomenon will be − dominate the ranking, because they deal with an issue that can happen to all of us or that has happened to many people around us. But I also see people that I know nothing about, who are at the top of the charts, which means that they have a strong, positive communication. So I think it also depends on the ability and the communicative competence to exploit these opportunities. No doubts" (R.D.).

Others are experimenting with new forms of financing through partnerships with private companies. For one interviewee, this type of collaboration is useful not only to raise resources, but also to strengthen the credibility and reputation of the association's work:

"They are real partnerships because we have always been convinced that in order to change things, you need to ally yourself with the world of the public and administrations, with citizens and associations, but also with businesses, i.e. the company that today makes biopolymers or new compostable products or the company that makes photovoltaic panels are allies for us, because they show economically and socially that your model, which you propose as an environmentalist, is feasible. So, if they tell you that you're a fake environmentalist – which was a joke from Salvini a few years ago – you say that it's not true, because you're putting forward proposals and you're doing it with companies" (Z.G.).

5.3 The contribution of private foundations

For many organisations that have opted not to have public funds for reasons of autonomy and independence, an important source of funding are private foundations and bank foundations.

In addition to autonomy from institutions, the other great advantage of private funds is timing: as one of our interviewees remarks, the management time and the way in which contributions are made by private subjects are not influenced by the slowness of the public administration or by bureaucracy, and this also allows the association to enjoy greater sustainability:

"If your funding comes only from the public sector, it is difficult to carry out the ordinary activities, because the funds are received when the expenses have already been incurred, which means that you have to pay in advance, there might also be delays, and so on...", while *"fundraising with private partners is easier because it takes shorter time to manage and is less subject to the rigours of the call for proposals and the slowness of public administration"* (A.N.). While some interviewees underline the advantages of these sources, others note

that working with private foundations can sometimes be more complex than with European ones:

"Even in that case calls are the only option, so the dream of having structural funds has never come true either. Even in that case it takes a huge amount of work, compared to EU projects, the management of EU projects is very easy, whereas foundations ask us for absurd reports; plus, a huge management effort is required" (A.G.).

Finally, as highlighted by one interviewee, associations mainly lack structural funds enabling them to operate in a systematic way and not only on the basis of project cycles. An expression that has become part of the jargon of those working on issues of financial sustainability is the "starvation circle" that afflicts many organisations, i.e. the problem of chronic underfunding, especially to cover indirect costs but also ordinary operations beyond projects.

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6. Communication and change of narratives

Italian civil society, in facing what is called the shrinking of civic space, has also had to deal with the loss of cultural influence on the country. Even under normal conditions, the possibility of having an impact on society is far more complex for the myriad of small and medium-sized actors compared to the strength of a national party, especially if it is in power.

In recent years, therefore, Italian civil society organisations have found themselves in a particularly difficult position and have questioned the communication approach to adopt and the narratives to respond to public de-legitimisation.

During the migratory emergency, communication played a central role in the construction of anti-migrant and consequently anti-NGO narratives that operated rescues at sea, just think of how the unfortunate definitions of "sea taxi" or "pull-factor" dominated the public discourse, opening a whole period of defamation that, although aimed at a specific branch of civil society, ended up delegitimising the entire sector in the eyes of public opinion, causing a "collapse in popularity":

"Collapse in popularity of all associations" (F.M.).

Hence, the need to promote a change of narrative that is able to restore legitimacy to the work of civil society organisations, deconstructing negative stereotypes and prejudices:

"Years ago I never used to say NGO, I used to say I worked in an association; but since the whole mess was put in place, the taxis of the sea, etc... We say NGO, but it's not nice (...) we went from not being recognised to being known negatively. So of course, there is an important work to be done and I think that we need to increase our efforts more and more" (A.G.).

The attacks and defamation campaigns suffered by civil society seem to have acted as a catalyst for a profound reflection on the importance of communication activity for the work of active civic organisations, an activity which, according to some interviewees, has often and for too long been underestimated and which could also help to take back that public space which has shrunk:

"(Civil society) quite wrongfully invested very little in the creation of narratives, and very little in communication (...) this is a mistake that the third sector has made and should address; we need to stop thinking that doing things well is enough; things must also be told, must be communicated (...). You can do a thousand things, but if you don't tell people about them, if you don't tell those who need to know about them, you only do half the work (...). If you want to take a piece of civic space today, you need to communicate, you have to focus on narratives" (E.P.).

As one interviewee points out, the communicative effort to change the narrative has to be constant and ongoing, because if a few sentences said by political representatives are enough to damage the reputation of organisations:

"Building an authoritative and positive image for associations is a job that takes years, which has to do with personal relationships but also with the culture of a country" (F.M).

Not only is it a challenge to rethink one's own communication strategies and language, but it is also clear to those interviewed that part of the difficulty in constructing new narratives is due to the fact that they have to continually come to terms with the opposing political forces' communication:

"It's clear that then we make a certain counter-information, you have to take into account that in the rest of the time there is all a mystification that has a very strong impact also in the press and communication organs, so we need to be resistant and resilient from that point of view, but we do feel all its importance for sure"(L.S.).

As one interviewee explains, in her experience of mobilisation a considerable part of the work served to respond to accusations made by political forces:

"The somewhat stereotyped narrative that took place both at local level by the administrators who had to justify their measure, and then from their national referents; (because) on this thing Salvini intervened, Di Maio intervened, the elite of the centre right and the centre left intervened (…). ***We needed to deal with the narrative of our competitors who were attacking us, accusing us of do-goodism and of being pro-foreigners to the detriment of Italians*** *(…) In particular, they discredited what we were doing as an organisation, accusing us of exploiting the children, of carrying on a political battle by exploiting an issue on which there was nothing to dispute, casting doubt on our good intentions and transparency in spending the money we had received, but never getting to the bottom of the provision and defending it no matter what…"* (M.F.).

Working on counter-narration requires time and energy, especially because in the majority of cases the confrontation with political forces is not a confrontation on equal terms: often ministers or party representatives enjoy privileged access to the media and therefore greater visibility and this allows them to be more effective in influencing the public debate:

"Of course if you step into the public debate with powerful media to say that these glasses are red, you have a minister who says it, you have a famous commentator who interviews him and makes him say it, then he goes on the top evening show and says it again, (while) those who see them black and say they are black are three people who will never take the floor; eventually people will think they are really red even if they see they are black. Unfortunately the mechanism of communication from this point of view is terrible, but we have to acknowledge it, we need to fight the battles being aware that we work with these tools" (F.R.).

The need to reach out to a large number of people is a challenge shared by several realities of Italian civil society, both among the more structured and the less structured ones. As several of our interviewees suggest, many civil society organisations suffer from the fact that they have a complex profile, which makes the task of identifying and adopting an effective communication strategy able to reach the broadest section of the population particularly difficult: civil society organisations often deal with many issues – from the protection of human rights to environmental protection, from research to international cooperation –, work in various contexts and with different partners depending on the projects, and for this very reason they struggle to consistently tell the story of what they do and why they do it, eventually failing to gain sufficient public visibility.

Digitalisation, as well as producing a profound crisis in the traditional media, has brought social media into the limelight, producing a radical transformation in communication, a phenomenon that civil society organisations must also come to terms with. In the face of this rapidly changing context, several civil society representatives feel a strong need to rethink their communication strategies and experiment with new channels and languages.

The issue of gaining public space through strategic communication is therefore central to the reflection of civil society organisations questioning their relationship with traditional media as well as with the new channels offered by social media.

6.1 Traditional media and digital communication

The centrality of the relationship with the press and traditional media is clear to all our interviewees. Although they are aware of the transformations this sector has undergone in recent years, several interviewees continue to acknowledge the strategic and relevant role of traditional communication:

"The social, cultural and scientific world we belong to must be echoed in the press" (L.S.);

"We are considering (...) whether perhaps we should establish a greater alliance at least with a part of the media, the one that is more sensitive and also more capable at this time of receiving innovative pushes, because the role that media communication can play is indeed a relevant role" (A.N.).

While recognising its role, some interviewees emphasised the weaknesses of the current Italian media system, stressing the urgent need for information:

"Free, transparent and independent (...) especially in relation to what is a mainstream world that we know is owned by few" (M.U.).

Many of our interviewees in fact perceive the issue of media independence in our country as a central problem:

"(It is) a major problem (...) among the big media we have only one independent publisher, all the others are affiliated to corporations etc..." (A.T).

The crisis of the traditional media has strengthened the influence of a few economic groups that influence editorial choices by buying advertising space:

"The fact that a few large Italian multinationals with their advertising systematically blackmail most newspapers and media – I would also add TV and various other forms – is an immense problem" (A.T).

For the civil society organisations that have made denunciation campaigns the core of their political action, finding space in the traditional media can be difficult:

"The journalists themselves tell us «we can't write about this», there is really a 'no go' from the editorial offices"(A. T.).

While some portray the current media landscape in a rather gloomy way:

"Our information system is quite frankly getting worse on the whole: news is becoming less and less elaborate, it is much easier for potential fake news to arrive even in the mainstream. This is amplified in the Italian case: we don't have the BBC, we have Rai1. Even newspapers that may be more conservative like the Wall Street Journal, the Financial Times or the New York Times... we have newspapers like the Corriere and Repubblica that have objectively become generalist newspapers that provide very little in-depth analysis... in-depth journalistic analysis is only paid for by the big corporations, it is enough to leaf through to understand" (A.T),

others highlight, the positive relations with media that have the same political stance on the issues:

"It is easier for us with some media, also because of the political stance that these media have taken and with which we also have day-to-day relations, I am thinking for example of Avvenire which is the newspaper of the Italian Episcopal Conference among others. (...) We have a very good relationship with them, there are journalists who are well aware that they can ask us for some type of stories, or we have a direct relationship with the director and the journalists if we have something to tell" (A.R.);

Most of the interviewees in any case say they are quite happy with the work their press offices manage to do with different media, from newspapers to radio to television. In addition to classic press releases, invitations to public events, presentations, conferences, festivals, etc., are all ways through which the society's organisations manage to engage journalists and the media in general.

One element that many of the organisations interviewed have in common is that they see themselves as a reliable source of information from the mainstream media, which often try to get in touch with them to gather news and figures on issues they work on such as migration or civil rights; for several interviewees, this function as a 'data and information provider' is very important because it helps consolidate the relationship with the media and reach public opinion.

Despite the predominantly positive considerations, two problems were identified with regard to this point. On the one hand, some interviewees denounce the unorthodox use of shared information that sometimes ends up being misinterpreted or manipulated:

"In checking how information is used (…) there have been not so many, but some cases of misuse of both the data, the information we make available and the statements" (G.N.);

"Many call us for interviews, live or recorded (…) anyway they get information from us, some in a more honest way, others somewhat manipulating the information we give…" (L.S.).

On the other hand, many interviewees complain about the fact that the media are mainly interested in personal stories, in news events that can appeal to public opinion. An interviewee claims that nowadays the relationship with the media today suffers from the following:

"«Syndrome of stories to be provided», in the sense that the relationship with the media is often conditioned by the fact that it is as if civic organisations were to provide cases that later become the subject of a TV programme or in-depth journalistic analysis and so on" (A.N.).

This attitude is viewed as problematic because it prevents organisations from carving out a space for themselves as a political subject:

*"The possibility of civic organisations to carve out also in media communication a role that is linked to their being a political subject rather than a subject that does activities specifically and can be a repository of specific information, that is very complicated (…) **it is harder to carve out a communication space that regards us as a political subject, not only us as a provider of information**. (…) Suffice it to think of how talk shows or these kind of TV programmes are structured, provided that these are spaces to be aspired to at the moment – which is something that has to be proven, of course –, but the privileged subjects of these communication spaces are not civic subjects, even on issues or policies on which they would probably have much more say than those who are usually interviewed"* (A.N.).

In order to overcome this 'syndrome', according to some, it is important for the media to abandon this interest limited to news events and to adopt instead a type of communication capable of providing adequate information on the phenomena dealt with from a social, cultural and above all political perspective:

"When we talk about women's rights to live a life that is free from violence, we are talking about a political fact, not an emergency or news fact. (...) Changing the narrative of violence would also help to emphasise the political solutions needed to prevent it, to counter it" (V.A.).

As one interviewee suggests, it is important that change in this sense starts with civil society itself, which must make an effort to adopt a language that can convey the complexity of the issues:

*"In our communication, in our press releases, in our public interventions we quite regularly use the expression 'male violence against women' which serves to include in the topic both the abusers and the women, the victims, to **stimulate an awareness of violence as a cultural, social, political issue that concerns everyone**"* (V.A.).

Although quite rarely, sometimes it happens that the role of civil society as a political actor is recognised by the mainstream media, which invite representatives of associations to take part in public debates or confrontations alongside institutional actors or representatives of the category:

"Depending on what happens the agencies or even newspapers call you and ask you what you think, this happens with radio, TV, for newspapers.... If one has to write an article on the Minniti code for the ANSA Agency or for Adnkronos or for Radio3, maybe a politician, a public administrator and maybe someone from the world of associations might call. It happens very rarely I have to say, but it happens, especially with those journalists who deal specifically with migration, clearly they are the ones who call us more often because they know we have something to say" (F.R.).

As one of our interviewees suggests, in order for its role as a political interlocutor to be recognised, it is important for civil society to be attentive and responsive in trying to enter more and more into the public debate:

"If a statement by a minister comes out, a decree-law in case of disaster, etc., commenting on the news and also being prompt is important" (F.R.).

This also applies in the case of emergencies or issues that suddenly become a priority on the political agenda:

"You have to be very quick. You need to try and use public communication as much as possible because that is the thing you can do the quickest, and try to involve and get the attention of parliamentarians, send proposals etc." (A.S.).

Although in many cases this approach does not produce particularly positive results:

"Usually these extemporaneous things don't pay off much afterwards, not because you fail in your campaign but because you often don't get to the end, to a legislative initiative, a decree on that issue... you talk about it for a few months then you don't talk about it anymore" (A.S.).

In Italy, the traditional media are therefore often just a showcase, whereas in the eyes of one of the interviewees, in other European countries:

"Media give much more space to what are criticisms from civil society and do have an impact, they can open up political spaces even at an institutional level" (A.T.).

Alongside the work of press offices, digital communication has become complementary to traditional communication in recent years. In fact, social media offer new platforms on which one can relaunch one's own content, from articles to radio or television broadcasts, as well as spaces where one can experiment with new languages and innovative communication techniques by creating original and *ad hoc* content.

Some associations try to take advantage of the spaces offered by the new social media and experiment with new formats to reach a wider target and audience, for example by producing web-docs or graphic novels or working with committed documentary film-makers or comedians because, as one of our interviewees explains:

"Narrative building needs all these other tools" (A.T.).

The majority of our interlocutors, however, still make limited use of social platforms or have only recently devoted themselves to understanding how these channels work and what language and communication strategies to use to generate social engagement.

6.2 The challenge of reaching the 'middle'

For civil society, working on public opinion means reaching policy makers indirectly:

"When a transformation is underway, (there is) a greater projection towards public opinion, so more focus on social media communication etc., because you need to reach the political decision-maker and you try and do it indirectly. (...) It is a dialogue that needs some hype in order to get the politician's attention, so more generalised public communication actions" (A.S.)

Communication is a challenge that is common to almost all organisations in the field, that is, to be able to get out of one's own niche of followers and reach the '*middle*' part of the population that is, the part of the population that is not necessarily xenophobic or hostile to minority rights but which is nevertheless difficult to sensitise and mobilise. As some of our interviewees confirm:

"As civil society (...) we are not so capable of speaking to those who do not think like us and therefore we find it very difficult to draw a part of public opinion into our arguments. (...) We do not succeed at all in influencing the middle segment of the population, which is not necessarily or prejudicially either with us or against us, we are not able to find arguments to shift the axis; we only address our small segment, and we are not able to address the movable middle, which would be fundamental, and I regard this as a big problem" (V.C.);

"It is the middle part of society, the undecided ones whom we must try to speak to and probably the language we have used up to now is not very good, so we must try to change our approach a bit (...) I believe that trying to speak to people who do not share our views is the great challenge and there is still a lot of work to be done, because we tend to be self-referential" (A.G.).

Knowing how to use an effective and non-self-referential language is the test on which civil society's ability to communicate across the board is measured. As one of our interviewees suggests, it is also important for civil society to abandon the technical language typical of scientific communication and to adopt an accessible one, as technical jargon does nothing but alienate interlocutors, convincing them that certain topics, certain problems do not concern them. This is the mistake that has been made, for example, in communicating the issue of the environment and climate change:

"one of the problems with climate change and its narrative is that it has often been reduced or limited to scientific communication, so a layperson thinks that scientists will take care of it, that it is not something that concerns them" (E.P.).

For civil society, the challenge is not only to find a language that suits the average 'layperson', but also to find the right communication channels through which to reach the general public:

"Sometimes we try to make a communication for people who are already aware, other times we ask ourselves how to manage to get people who are not interested in the issue to date (...) we still try to reach different groups, different populations who are interested in different ways" (M.S.).

As our interviewees put it, both the channels offered by traditional media and the new digital tools pose problems in this respect.

On the one hand, several interviewees agree that the traditional media, especially the print media, are no longer able to do large-scale communication capable of reaching the average citizen, because they have now become a source of information for a narrow niche of politicians or citizens who are already interested in and sensitive to certain issues:

"Repubblica or Il Sole 24 Ore are read in parliament and maybe by some slightly more attentive citizens, so the world that is already conscious" (Z.G.);

"A media such as Repubblica at the moment is read by a particular group of people with specific characteristics, and that general-purpose information (Repubblica) is not really the right way to reach them" (A.N.).

On the other hand, some interviewees also claim that:

"When you talk on social media you are not talking to Italian public opinion, you are talking to the people who follow you" (A.S.),

so even in this case reaching the average uninformed citizen can be quite difficult, especially if one considers that there is a certain segment of the population that does not have a profile on social platforms because maybe:

"Does not like this world, does not know it or has no interest in aspiring to it" (E.P.).

Despite this, most of the interviewees tend to consider digital channels more useful for reaching and mobilising the average population than the traditional press, especially if exploited to their full potential:

"To reach citizens today it is easier to make a post on Facebook or do a story on Instagram, rather than having an article written in the Corriere della Sera; media have changed too, newspapers are no longer what they used to be, people who buy the newspaper are fewer and fewer, everyone reads online, social media are a more impactful anyway" (E.P.).

One of our interviewees claims that social media can also be useful to spread the kind of scientific communication that tends to dominate the discourse on certain topics, re-proposing in different forms and with a more accessible language that information often contained in scientific papers or articles in order to reach *"the average citizen or the uninterested citizen"* (M.S.).

Several interviewees wished to emphasise that the ultimate effort in rethinking one's mode of communication should not be to reach and raise the awareness of the middle section of the population, but rather to mobilise it. In fact, one of our interviewees explained how for her association, communication activity is propaedeutic to civic activation:

"It is important to provide information that is propaedeutic, that is preparatory to activation, because we have always thought that without bridging the information gaps that then translate into reality, often also due to the inadequacy of public opinion, it is difficult for citizens to become active; so, much of our activity involves empowerment that is also functional to this" (A.N.)

Communication thus becomes an instrument of social activation through which to involve citizens by inviting them to take on a part, even a small one, of civic responsibility: :

"Laypeople who are not inside this world, precisely because there is a narrative that is not complete, in some cases biased, in some cases with terminology that is too difficult, do not get to understand that they are actually the protagonists, (...) and I believe the third sector really should work as if it were a translator in order to fill this gap" (E.P.)

One interviewee believes that in order for communication to become an effective mobilisation tool, the key is to be able to explain the benefit that the individual citizen could gain from civic action:

"One thing that I think makes a substantial difference in engaging the media population is to explain the benefits they can get from this kind of initiative and what the initiatives can eventually do, because if people do not perceive the benefit they do not mobilise basically, (...) those who are more aware serve to drag and pull those who are less so; in order to get rid of some kind of scepticism it is necessary to explain what it can bring to you as an individual, before what it brings to the community, because if you talk about benefits that are too abstract for the city, for the country, for Europe, for the world, a certain segment of the population will say «yes, but what about me?»" (E.P.).

6.3 Different topics, different communicative effectiveness

Often times the effectiveness of communication by civil society organisations in appealing to citizens and influencing the public debate depends on the type of issue dealt with and the extent to which it is perceived as a priority by public opinion. What emerges from the interviews is that the topics that gain the most visibility within the public space are those that touch people's emotions and are somehow able to arouse empathy in those who are interested:

"It is clear that there is no point in talking so much about figures and that we need to motivate people more from a perspective of values and, more importantly, from an sympathetic point of view. While others speak to people's guts, we try to address their critical thinking, their hearts. We are now trying to find new ways of connecting with public opinion" (A.R.).

This aspect was also the subject of a recent research conducted by the London School of Economics in collaboration with Ca' Foscari University of Venice, which was also mentioned by one of our interviewees. By monitoring the content published on the Facebook page of Corriere della Sera concerning migration, the researchers tried to understand which were able to generate a more civilised and

less polarised debate. The project showed that the choice of many journalists to "tell human interest stories in order to arouse empathy" (LSE, 2019, p. 11) is not always immune to negative comments: if this strategy seems to work when telling personal stories of different migrants, the trend seems to reverse when telling the stories of groups of people (LSE, 2019).

The importance of personal stories goes hand in hand with the importance of acknowledging the prominence of weaker subjects within the public debate:

"In Italy there is a situation for which in the 1990s when foreigners were roughly one-fifth less – or even less – than they are now, there was more space in the public debate regarding them than there is now, although there are more than 5 million foreigners (...). Over the last 20 years we have seen a progressive shrinking of the space in public communication both for the subjects of civil society, but also and above all for the protagonists, i.e. foreigners. I think that until immigrants, foreigners, and people of foreign origin play a leading role in the public debate concerning them, it will be difficult for us to make progress, because historically it is not possible for a social subject to emancipate itself passively, without doing anything... women have emancipated themselves, homosexuals have emancipated themselves, none get their rights without fighting their own battles" (F.M.).

For instance, the Lodi experience is also an example of the leading role played by those directly concerned: it was precisely the Egyptian community affected by the council's discriminatory regulation that was the first to take action, launching the whole campaign that later resulted in the creation of the Coordinamento Uguali Doveri. However, it is not always the case that the mobilisation of protagonists receives a supportive response; there can easily be hostile responses in some adverse contexts.

Of course, some players are more effective in emotional communication than others. As the interviewee points out, the image of the foreign children who could not have access to school services like their Italian peers was a very strong image that facilitated the task:

"I can say that maybe we communicated in the right way, (...) maybe the fact (...) that there were children involved in this matter was very effective from the point of view of communication. I am convinced that if instead of children there had been elderly people, this would never have happened. The idea of the foreign child in the canteen who does not eat with his classmates is something that strikes the imagination more than I would have thought; it really has a certain degree of effectiveness. (...) It was something that struck an chord in an extraordinary way" (M.F.).

In this story, the media reported and leveraged the images and stories of the children involved, but did not give as much weight to the political results achieved thanks to the work of the Coordinamento[16]:

"I believe these are things that people know nothing about, because mainstream information shows the children of Lodi who look sad because they have to walk to school or eat sandwiches in the canteen, but these things here have happened because from the legal point of view the issue of non-discrimination on access to services worked well" (M.F.).

Some topics struggle for years before making it onto the agenda. This is the case, for example, of environmental issues, although recently, also as a consequence of increasingly extreme natural events and a sense of emergency and fear for a future that is more and more uncertain, we have noticed a slight shift:

"If we talk about the quality of a forest or a renewable source plant, it is much more difficult to touch people's emotions, so it's not easy, but we are trying to open up to that world because after all, the climate issue, with those disasters that are happening, the 50 °C in Italian cities, etc., is starting to be perceived by people" (Z.G.);

"We are living through a series of situations and every day there is a new catastrophe, every day there is bad news, so perhaps communication in this sense is more penetrating, it is more concrete; this is also because we are more afraid, so we communicate in a different way" (M.S.).

Other topics, however, remain "hard to digest for the public opinion" (A.Sc.) As the representative of an association working in the criminal justice sector points out:

"The feeling is that public opinion will never be your ally, it has never been so far in any country in the reform of criminal law in a protectionist perspective, nor in the reform of criminal law in a progressive perspective; it is always somehow an issue that triggers opposite reactions, so you have to try not to have public opinion against you" (A.S.).

A further aspect that influences communication and that was often pointed out by our interviewees concerns the urgency with which certain issues are perceived by the public. Again, a good example is offered by the experience of organisations in the environmental sector: as one interviewee recalls, if before the pandemic, environmental issues related to climate change had started to be considered a priority by the population and received a rather high level of attention:

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[16] With the resources raised through fundraising, the Coordinamento, again with the invaluable help of the ASGI association and NAGA, was able to help a foreign citizen residing in another Milanese municipality to appeal against the municipal regulation for the allocation of public housing, an appeal that was won and that opened a window for other appeals against the regional regulation on the subject considered discriminatory from several points of view.

"to date, COVID-19 has changed this perception, so in this sense there has been a downsizing of the communication of all issues related to the climate crisis" (M. S.).

Then there are some issues that are particularly difficult to communicate, such as migration. One of our interviewees claims that:

"Catholic people themselves are divided on these issues here... it happened once that we had a bishop – and also another bishop – against us because, although he told us that he agreed, in his diocese we had to be more cautious, we had to be careful because as a bishop he had to keep his people united, not to cause divisions, and by taking a very clear position on this he risked not being understood or being manipulated" (A.R.).

In this case, communication is also hindered by the polarising rhetoric that has imposed itself in the public debate, a consequence of a political narrative often reduced to populist slogans ('Italians first'), a logic of 'us vs. them' whereby the guarantee of human rights has become a zero-sum relationship, as if recognising one right for one migrant automatically meant taking one away from an Italian citizen.

In fact, several interviewees point out how today the issue of fundamental rights has become a controversial topic, which hides communication pitfalls. One of our interviewees highlighted the paradox whereby an awareness-raising campaign, for example, on the right to health of migrants, runs the risk of being read as 'anti-Italian'', as if by defending the rights of immigrants, one did not protect those of Italian citizens, thus producing the opposite communicative effect to the one desired:

"If you separate the right of the migrant from the right of the person, whether Italian citizen, European citizen, you are making a mistake, you should put both people on the same level, regardless of their origins, what counts are human rights, the right to work, the right to a house, the right to social inclusion, education, health, etc., they are everyone's rights and creating differences does nothing but fuel a war between the poor. (...) We should talk about everyone's right to health, which have to do with all of us, but the fact that some are more discriminated than others inevitably leads to more specific campaigns, more focused on the weaker segments. In short, it is not easy to resolve this issue" (A.R.).

Promoting a change of narrative for civil society therefore means working to overcome this logic of polarisation, to make average citizens, who are inundated with populist slogans, understand that in reality by defending the rights of a more vulnerable category of people, they do not *"risk any danger, they do not lose out, they have no disadvantages"*(E.P.).

7. Generational turnover

There is no doubt that Italian civil society is today in a phase of transition and change. For many interviewees, that of generational turnover, especially in top positions, is a central issue affecting not only politics, but also civil society.

Similarly to the world of politics, personalisation in associations creates the perception of an elite that prevents new generations from contributing to organisations with different experiences and knowledge:

"In Italy there is a phenomenon whereby at some point when you talk about an NGO you automatically associate it with a person; this is indeed the classic example of 'personalisation', which then creates a situation in which those who approach that world often then eventually move away from it, because they realise that there is a kind of civil society elite that intends to pass on knowledge to the new generations" (F.M.).

"Certain mechanisms that have been experienced in the country, the man alone in charge, the woman alone in charge, etc., have also been experienced in active civic associations" and *"have prevented the creation of a new ruling class"* (A.M.).

Most of the interviewees show full awareness of this:

"The big problem we have is that most of our NGOs have presidents, secretaries, etc. who are old and have problems with turnover. We are aware that young people are there and many times they are much better even than those who currently work; they are much more up-to-date, they are deep into the topics, so we also now have a network of young people who help us on advocacy and since last year we have started to do a youth camp, which we will do again this year... So there is this consciousness and there are already active collaborations which is great but, after all, we are the ones who have to leave, because if we continue to stay in our place and don't make room for others, obviously there will be no turnover" (A.R.).

For this reason, several interviewees feel the need to regenerate their membership base and recruit especially new generations that can re-energise the sector:

"I think that civic activism in Italy enjoys a good state of health, despite the fact that traditional world of associations probably suffers from a certain internal tiredness, often due to the fact that traditional associations are associations that have many decades of activity under their belt; so they often have an membership base made up of people who are quite old, which is a problem that many associations have, hence the difficulty of attracting civic activism that is less formalised, less structured, younger in terms of age, this is a problem that I believe many associations (...) experience and have to come to terms with" (A.N.).

In recent years, the success of various social movements such as Fridays for Future, Italians without citizenship and Black Lives Matter – just to name a few – is an indication that within Italian civil society, 'new actors' are emerging:

"New actors, new groups mainly made up of young people (…) who express themselves using different channels of activism and communication" and who can make a *"huge contribution to reinventing the way of doing activism"* (G.N).

Many interviewees emphasise the importance of these new *"movements that form, break up, aggregate and renew themselves"* (R.D.) and express confidence in the new generations, whose commitment to seeking unbiased information that is accurate, complete and far from stereotypes and populism they recognise:

"The new generations who are also in close contact with these internationalist channels, who get informed on the media, on the networks, including specialised ones, no longer run the risk of falling into the trap of demagogy and populism; new generations are very promising in this regard, they are trying to be more informed. Therefore, I am very optimistic and hopeful for the future. Much rhetoric belongs to the old world; luckily it linked to some old dinosaurs, but we believe it will slowly be deconstructed" (L.S.).

The key word for the success of these experiences is innovation: as one of our interviewees points out, a challenge for the movements that have emerged in recent years, which have exploited digital communication and fostered new forms of civic mobilisation, will be to maintain their innovative strength in the near future, guarding against the *"bad habit of becoming para-party movements"* (A.T.).

The more traditional and consolidated organisations are thus increasingly being flanked by more informal and streamlined experiences capable of mobilising a cross-party political base. Many of our interviewees embrace this transition and look to the future with optimism:

"Change and crises are not necessarily something negative. They can definitely lead to a variety of new opportunities" (M.U).

Conclusions

Our research has investigated the response of Italian civil society to the shrinking space for civic action and its ability to contribute to the political process, with the aim of contributing to the debate that has emerged on this issue in various European countries.

Since the end of 2016, in conjunction with the worsening of the crisis in the European management of migratory flows, several NGOs engaged in rescue in the Mediterranean Sea have been faced with smear campaigns, criminal prosecutions and regulations restricting their action. The campaign of criminalisation of solidarity towards migrants quickly spread to the whole of Italian civil society, also involving organisations active in fields other than reception, undermining the reputation of the entire sector in the public eye.

Our enquiry into the consequences of the public de-legitimisation of civil society action in Italy drew on the academic production and analyses conducted by international organisations on the subject and was based on 18 in-depth interviews with leading actors of Italian civil society.

The picture that emerged showed a context of profound changes in the relationship between civil society and politics in recent decades. Emancipating itself from its role as a "transmission belt" of political parties, Italian civil society has been active since the 1990s, gaining in addition strong autonomy.

This transformation, however, occurred at the same time as the weakening of the parties, which were the first to be affected by the advance of populism. Civil society thus found itself without an institutional counterpart capable of transforming its requests into political decisions.

While pride in the autonomy gained dominates among our interviewees, there is full awareness of the negative consequences of the weakening of politics. There is full awareness of the fact that the public de-legitimisation suffered in recent years is the result of the stances of political forces representing a large part of the constitutional arc, in a frantic search for electoral consensus.

Today, while the acute phase of public de-legitimisation seems to have passed, the representatives of civil society whom we interviewed point to the absence of political interlocutors capable of giving substance to the proposals put forward. In fact, the many initiatives of civil society clash with an attitude of openness that is often only apparent in formal terms on the part of the institutions.

Moreover, as our interviewees complain, participatory processes are such in name only and do not lead to effective change at the political level, also because the Italian political class shows little appreciation thereof.

Among those interviewed, there are those who stress how the weakness of politics is worryingly associated with the strength of certain economic actors: 'state capture' and the collusion between economic and political interests limits the freedom of the media and risks thwarting the efforts of civil society.

Although most of our interviewees do not express any doubts about the shrinking of the civic space in recent years, not all realities have suffered the situation in the same way: among the realities interviewed, those most affected by the hostile environment are undoubtedly the organisations engaged in the defence of migrants.

The interviews show that there is a lack of institutional culture of fundamental rights in the country, which has negative consequences on the whole of civil society. As some interviewees point out, the issue of rights is one that polarises public debate but is not at the top of the political agenda. Evidence of this is the fact that Italy is one of the two EU countries that still does not have an independent human rights institution despite its international commitments.

However, civil society has not been significantly active on this issue either, and several of our interlocutors admit that they have not considered this among their priorities so far, confirming Italy's long-established scepticism towards the ability of institutions to make a difference.

Despite the difficulties in building a relationship with political decision-makers, the organisations we consulted invest considerable energy and resources in institutional dialogue, raising awareness amongst individual parliamentarians, participating in hearings or leveraging the participatory mechanisms of international organisations.

Amongst the advocacy strategies that have recently entered the toolkit of Italian civil society to which associations increasingly resort is judicial litigation, both at national and international level. Some consider it as the new frontier of civic activism: it is a matter of exploiting existing laws protecting fundamental rights to enforce their observance. The judgments of the European Court of Human Rights of the Council of Europe, for example, have achieved important results.

Beyond the strategy adopted, the interviews reveal some constants that have enabled Italian civil society to be appreciated over the years: these include the possibility of ensuring a lasting commitment, the ability to combine different intervention strategies and the construction of cross-cutting alliances with both public and private, national and international stakeholders.

Despite the political and institutional weakness of the country, during the interviews, the difficulty of seeing the contribution of civil society organisations and their role as fundamental interlocutors for the maintenance of democracy emerged.

Some interviewees highlighted the lack of inclusion in the drafting of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, claiming a lack of transparency in the decision-making process that led to the adoption of the plan. Only after getting organised in a Civic Observatory did some organisations obtain the inclusion of civil society in the economic, social and territorial partnership table in charge of monitoring the plan's implementation.

The representatives of the Civic Observatory whom we interviewed welcomed this result, but warned that the fact that the NRRP data remain accessible only to public administrations and not to all citizens does not guarantee the necessary transparency when implementing projects.

A central issue that contributes to weakening the position of civil society is certainly the lack of financial resources to support activities. Not only is there a lack of an independent institution for the promotion and protection of fundamental rights in our country, but, as several interviewees state, there is also a lack of national funding streams for human rights organisations, which are therefore compelled to seek European or international sources of funding.

As can be inferred from the words of our interviewees, Italian organisations working on fundamental rights rely mainly on European funding. The funds directly managed by the Commission require a commitment that is hardly sustainable for the small and medium-sized organisations that represent a considerable part of the civil society landscape in the country.

In contrast, European funds managed by national institutions do not always guarantee the necessary political autonomy. Some particularly well-established organisations defend their independence by concentrating on fundraising from private individuals; for some organisations it is foundations or private entities that make the difference.

For all of them, however, the chronic lack of funds severely limits their ability to safeguard fundamental rights and protect the rule of law in our country. Although the shrinkage of civic space in Italy cannot be compared to the much more serious shrinkage in other countries, the political drift of recent years is cause for concern.

Faced with the hostile propaganda of recent years, Italian civil society has not been able to organise a coordinated response, and various interviewees have emphasised the importance of overcoming the fragmentation typical of Italian associations and building networks capable of making their work more incisive vis-à-vis politics.

Nevertheless, our interviewees were not unanimous in their assessment of the effectiveness of the networks. The urge to be at the centre of attention, the

'personalisation' of some organisations and above all the commitment they require sometimes reduce the space for building alliances capable of making a difference. Networking is, however, a need felt by many, and many attempts are being made to experiment with informal collaboration strategies that allow more room for extemporaneous activation and extend alliances to stakeholders who have different interests but common goals.

Many Italian civil society organisations work between international and domestic politics, and claim a strong link between the two levels, as well as between the local, national and European levels.

European networks offer Italian civil society a broader space for action and the European decision-making process provides civil society with important lobbying tools that also apply at the national level. Monitoring the implementation of European regulations and the commitments made by our country in international fora is an integral part of the work of various organisations and there are many transnational political action initiatives in place to put pressure on national institutions, from drafting shadow reports to working with the special rapporteurs of international organisations.

A final aspect explored concerns the ability of civil society organisations to invest in communication to promote a change of narratives that can restore their legitimacy as well as improve their ability to mobilise public opinion. As we could see, media communication contributed significantly to the campaign of criminalisation of NGOs in our country, exacerbating the populist and xenophobic narrative that caused a collapse of civil society's credibility.

Access to the media is an aspect considered central by many stakeholders, who complain that the current crisis-stricken Italian media landscape is being squeezed by economic groups that undermine its autonomy. Working with the traditional media remains crucial for civil society organisations, which continue to recognise its central role in gaining public visibility.

At the same time, the importance of digital communication is clear to everyone, but many organisations have only recently begun to engage with it.

The central challenge that emerges with respect to communication is definitely that of being able to reach the middle section of the population, which does not have a defined position with respect to certain issues. Various organisations are experimenting with new communication techniques and languages in order to achieve this crucial result both for ordinary work and to effectively counter threats to the civic action space.

Italian civil society: from target to antidote to the crisis of democracy?

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It is clear that in order to be able to fulfil all these needs – from communication to the search for funding, from networks to the relationship with politics – Italian civil society needs a certain level of professionalisation. In order to prevent these tasks from being detrimental to grassroots connection, however, there needs to be a collaborative effort between different actors, first and foremost between national and territorial realities.

In the last two years, the pandemic has dealt a severe blow to civil society organisations in Italy as well. However, many interviewees looked on the bright side of the situation, namely the solidarity response that characterised many urban contexts where grassroots organisations concretely demonstrated the significance of civic action. Moreover, the impossibility of resorting to traditional activation tools, including street demonstrations, encouraged the exploration of new and equally effective modes of civic action.

For several of our interviewees, the issue of generational turnover has also become urgent within the world of associations in order to make room for the energies and initiatives of the younger generations. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, we observed the proliferation of youth movements, from Fridays for Future to Italians without citizenship. Health restrictions curbed these momentums but did not extinguish them. The hope is that they will return to give vigour, from an intellectual and human point of view, to civil society associations.

Perhaps it is also due to age-related reasons that the issue of the digital security of those engaged in the protection of fundamental rights emerged little during the interviews. However, the problem exists and must be brought to the surface by spreading awareness among Italian associations of the risks associated with digital surveillance. Likewise in many European countries, in Italy too there are frequent cases of abuse of strategic lawsuits against public participation, also known as SLAPP, aimed at limiting the freedom of expression and action of activists and human rights defenders. Both of these practices contribute to limiting the space for action of civil society and therefore require specific attention.

Cross-party alliances, also from a generational perspective, are crucial to truly transform Italian civil society from a target to an antidote to the crisis of democracy. In the years to come, an important difference will be made by the availability of resources available to civil society, as well as the resolve to pursue concrete results in the protection of human rights while maintaining the autonomy gained from politics and effectively persuading public opinion of the centrality of human rights and the protection of civic spaces for the resilience of democracy.

Recommendations

The results of this research portray an ambivalent picture of the state of democracy and civil society in Italy. The latter is developing a new relationship with politics and public opinion in a difficult context: in a dialogue with political parties that are weak and in the grip of populism and with the mass media in great difficulty. On top of this, there is a lack of adequate resources to work on fundamental rights, in a context of fragmentation and limited generational turnover.

Our recommendations are addressed to:

Policy makers, to whom we recommend in particular to:

1. Strive to ensure the emergence of an independent and adequately funded human rights authority as soon as possible;

2. Work to ensure the independence of the Italian Equality body and enable it to operate in support of civil society;

3. Ensure that the contribution of civil society is fully incorporated into the decision-making processes;

4. Review the system of grants to the media to foster their independence;

5. Ensure adequate resources for civil society organisations working to protect human rights, through transparent means and taking into account the needs of both those operating at the international level and those with a greater impact at the local level;

6. Strengthen legislation against specious complaints against human rights activists and defenders.

Civil society, to which we recommend in particular to:

1. Work to strengthen the Italian Equality body and lobby for the establishment of the independent human rights authority;

2. Strive to strengthen their own participation in the decision-making process also by demanding clear and transparent rules;

3. Work on their ability to reach public opinion through effective narratives and the renewal of communication tools;

4. Pay more attention to the threats to their own security that also derive from the digitalisation of public space;

5. Engage in building cross-cutting networks and coalitions by overcoming the urge to be at the centre of attention that limit political effectiveness;

6. Always explore new ways of involving stakeholders to bring together expertise and networks;

7. Exploit all opportunities for action offered by the transnational and European space, creating alliances with European institutions and international organisations to defend the civic space.

To international donors, to whom we recommend in particular to:

1. Give due consideration to Italy as an important country for the balance of the entire European space by regularly monitoring the functioning of its democratic institutions;

2. Exert new pressure on Italian institutions so that they give due consideration to the issue of fundamental rights and establish institutions to protect them;

3. Stimulate Italian institutions to recognise the role of civil society in the functioning of democracy;

4. Stimulate Italian civil society to get ready to face possible new threats to its role as a pillar of the democratic system;

5. Encourage Italian civil society to network between national and territorial realities in order to strengthen the overall space for civic action in the country.

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List of organisations and movements interviewed

1. A Buon Diritto
2. Amnesty International Italia
3. Antigone
4. ARCI
5. Cittadinanzattiva
6. Coordinamento Uguali Doveri Lodi
7. Cospe
8. D.I.Re
9. Focsiv
10. Fondazione punto.sud
11. Forum Disuguaglianze e Diversità
12. Fridays for Future
13. Idos
14. Legambiente
15. Libera
16. Lunaria
17. ReCommon
18. Rete In Difesa Di

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CILD

Established in 2014, the Italian Coalition for Civil Liberties and Rights (Italian acronym CILD) is a network of 41 civil society organisations working to defend and promote the rights and liberties of all, combining advocacy, public campaigns and legal action. The specific areas CILD focuses on are mainly migrant and refugee rights, LGBTI rights, justice, health, Roma and Sinti rights and freedom of expression. Find out more online at www.cild.eu

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