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Governing without choosing: the limits of performative politics

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ABSTRACT

In this introduction to the Contemporary Italian Politics special issue on Politics in Italy in 2025 we examine political developments by drawing on the distinction between performative and transformative politics. The individual contributions to this special issue reveal a common pattern: the growing predominance of political signalling over structural policy change across a broad variety of policy domains including foreign affairs, defence, labour markets, banking, judicial reform, civil rights, higher education, and security. In our article we argue that performative politics, understood as the production of politically meaningful signals aimed at shaping identities, maintaining coalitions, and managing constituencies, has become a rational response to the constraints limiting governments' capacity for transformative action. These constraints include fiscal pressures, demographic decline, institutional veto points, coalition fragmentation, and European governance frameworks. The Meloni government is a particularly revealing example of this dynamic, combining strong political capacity in coalition management and in narrative construction, on the one hand, with more limited ability to implement reforms capable of addressing long-term structural challenges, on the other. Collectively, the articles highlight how symbolic interventions in areas such as sovereignty, security, migration, labour policy, and civil rights often substitute for deeper institutional and socio-economic transformation. While this strategy has contributed to government stability and coalition cohesion, it also generates accumulating costs, including unresolved economic vulnerabilities, institutional tensions, and challenges to Italy's international credibility. The Italian case is useful as it illustrates broader dynamics affecting contemporary democratic governance across advanced capitalist societies.

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The articles brought together in this special issue examine Italian politics in 2025 across a wide range of domains, from foreign and defence policy to labour markets, banking, judicial reform, civil rights, higher education, and security. While each contribution addresses a distinct policy area and adopts its own analytical perspective, collectively, they point to a common question: how do governments operate when their capacity to

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transform underlying social, economic, and institutional realities is increasingly constrained? We argue that the Italian case is particularly illuminating because it reveals a growing divergence between the politics of signalling and the politics of structural change. To capture this dynamic, this introduction interprets the events and policy debates of 2025 through the distinction between performative and transformative politics, using it as a framework for interpreting the contributions that follow and for understanding the broader trajectory of Italian democracy.

Performative versus transformative politics: a theoretical framework

Politics operates on at least two distinct levels. On the first, it produces signals: declarations, confrontations, symbolic gestures, and identity performances that tell constituents, coalition partners, and opponents what a political actor/party stands for, who its adversaries are, and what values it claims to represent. On the second level, it produces outcomes: policies that alter the distribution of resources, institutions that change how decisions are made, and reforms that restructure the underlying conditions of social and economic life. These two arenas are not the same, and understanding their relationship is essential for understanding modern democratic politics.

The distinction has deep roots in the study of political behaviour. Indeed, much of what passes for democratic governance consists in the management of appearances, or symbolic politics, rather than the resolution of tangible problems (Edelman 1964). Political activity generates two very different kinds of outputs. For the attentive, organized minorities who stand to gain or lose materially from government decisions, politics delivers tangible resources: contracts, regulatory exemptions, legislative protection. For the mass public, however, politics generally delivers something else entirely: reassurance, identity affirmation, and the staged satisfaction of knowing that political leaders are alert to threats and committed to the right values. To understand political contestation and action it is critical to take this second aspect of politics seriously as a critical feature of democratic systems rather than as a corruption or failure of them (Edelman 1964, 1988). The production of symbols is not incidental to democratic politics; it is, under specific conditions, its primary output, as has been the case in Italy over the past year.

It is important to note that performative politics is not the same as dishonest politics, and it is not identical to what is sometimes called 'valence politics' or the politics of competence signalling. The symbolic or performative aspect of politics exists because it meets real needs, including the need for political identity, for emotional engagement with the public sphere, and for the coordination of expectations around shared values, that purely technocratic governance cannot address. Nor is performative politics the same as populism, although the two can overlap.[1] What defines performative politics is the systematic displacement of transformative effort by signal production, not the content of the signals produced.

This is what we mean by performative politics in the Italian context as well: the systematic production of politically meaningful signals the primary function of which is to shape identities, consolidate coalitions, and manage constituencies, rather than to achieve durable structural change in the conditions that generated the political problem in the first place. The term is not meant to imply cynicism or bad faith. Political actors who engage in performative politics are often genuinely committed to the values they

profess; what they are doing is expressing those values in a register that is more immediately legible and electorally functional than the slow, contested, and uncertain work of structural reform. What makes it worth examining carefully is the specific conditions under which it becomes dominant, the mechanisms through which it sustains itself, and the costs it accumulates when structural problems are deferred rather than addressed. These are the questions addressed by the articles in this special issue.

The contrast with transformative politics is equally important to specify. Transformative politics achieves change in the underlying rules, resources, and institutions that govern a domain of social life. It is not simply radical or ideologically ambitious politics; modest technocratic reforms can be transformative if they alter incentive structures in durable ways. What transformative politics requires is a translation from political intention to implemented policy, and from policy to changed behaviour by the relevant actors. This translation is difficult at the best of times and can be blocked entirely by a combination of fiscal constraints, institutional veto points, coalition incompatibilities, and the indifference or active resistance of the actors whose behaviour must change. The more these obstacles accumulate, the more rational it becomes for political actors to invest in the performative register, where the signal can be produced without depending on the long chain of implementation that structural change requires.

This dynamic, in which performative capacity expands as transformative capacity contracts, is not unique to Italy and has been identified in a number of other contexts (Crouch 2004).[2] These are general features of advanced capitalist democracies, not peculiarities of Italy. What makes Italy a particularly rich case for studying these dynamics is not that performative politics is more cynical there than elsewhere, but that the conditions that favour it are more fully developed, more structurally embedded, and more thoroughly entangled with each other than in most comparable polities. Italy entered 2025 with a coalition government whose three constituent parties hold genuinely incompatible conceptions of sovereignty and of Italy's place in Europe; with a debt-to-GDP ratio that has severely limited discretionary spending; a judicial system caught in a decades-old structural paradox between formal independence and actual factional capture; a labour market whose growth model has generated thirty-five years of real wage stagnation with no structural resolution in sight; and with the deepest demographic contraction of any major European economy. Against this background, the articles assembled in this special issue offer a sustained examination of Italian politics in 2025 across nine domains, from foreign and trade policy and defence to labour markets, banking, judicial reform, civil rights, and security policy. What emerges from reading these articles together is not so much a portrait of a single government's choices, but rather an account of a political system that has refined performative politics to a high art, and of the structural conditions that make this both rational and costly.

Coalition, sovereignty, and the logic of performative differentiation

The structural precondition for performative politics in 2025 Italy was the coalition arrangement that brought Giorgia Meloni to power in October 2022 and that remained in place throughout the period examined in this special issue. The coalition consists of three main parties, Fratelli d'Italia, the Lega, and Forza Italia, whose electorates and ideological traditions rest on different, and not easily reconcilable, foundations. Bové

Rud's contribution to this special issue offers the most penetrating analysis of how this incompatibility is managed. The three parties hold what Bové Rud identifies as 'structurally different conceptions of sovereignty.' For Fratelli d'Italia this is sovereigntism rooted in the republican tradition, which is committed to Italy's place within NATO and the European Union as the expression of a recovered national dignity. This is in contrast to the Lega's populist sovereigntism, which treats Brussels and multilateral institutions as constraints limiting free exercise of the popular will and Forza Italia's European continuity, which tends to defer to EU frameworks and avoids nationalist confrontation. These conceptions cannot be reconciled at the level of policy without fracturing the coalition. What prevents fracture is that they are channelled into performance rather than pressed to the point of policy resolution.

This dynamic operated with particular clarity in the domain of foreign policy during 2025, when two major geopolitical events, the return of the Trump administration in Washington and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, provided unusually rich material for performative differentiation. Meloni positioned herself as a European statesperson and potential interlocutor with Washington: she attended Trump's inauguration as the only European head of government to do so, placed herself in the role of a bridge between Brussels and the new American administration, and maintained Italy's formal support for Ukraine. At the same time, Salvini (Lega) simultaneously performed populist scepticism, questioning whether Italian taxpayers' money should fund Ukrainian reconstruction and echoing Trump's framing of the potential for a negotiated settlement. In contrast Tajani (Forza Italia) represented institutional continuity, deferring to EU competence and echoing the European mainstream. Importantly, none of these performances required the executive to govern differently. Italy's actual foreign policy remained consistent and institutionally coherent throughout. The performances exploited what Bové Rud aptly describes as the 'considerable scope for symbolic positioning in the foreign-policy arena,' a domain that carries strong identity signals, but has limited direct electoral consequences for most citizens.

The broader governing style that makes this arrangement functional is the subject of Capano and Ghio's (Chapter 6) analysis of Italian executive behaviour, with particular attention to university governance and research policy. Their diagnosis, which recurs as an organizing concept throughout this special issue, is one of high political capacity combined with low analytical capacity. The Meloni government demonstrates exceptional skill at managing the political arena by constructing legible narratives, staging confrontations with opponents, and maintaining the coalition's electoral position. What it invests less in is the careful analytical work of designing and implementing policies, let alone structural reforms. This is a process that requires not only political will, but also the capacity to identify which interventions will actually alter the underlying dynamics generating the problem. High political capacity without corresponding analytical capacity produces governance that is effective at the level of signalling but less effective at the level of structural change. The signal is real, but it does not travel all the way to the structural outcome it appears to promise.

Capano and Ghio document this pattern in the specific context of higher education and research governance, where the Government's interventions in 2025 were shaped more by the logic of coalition management and adversarial positioning towards perceived institutional enemies, including the research evaluation authority ANVUR, than

by a sustained analytical vision of what Italian universities need in order to improve their performance. The result is a set of policy moves that are best understood as political gestures. These effectively signalled the Government's scepticism towards technocratic evaluation mechanisms, as well as its preference for a different model of institutional governance and willingness to confront established interests in academia. However, they failed to crystalize into a coherent strategy for addressing Italy's chronic problems in tertiary education. The authors argue that this pattern is not specific to higher education but reflects a governing mode the roots of which lie in the specific incentive structure of coalition politics under fiscal constraint, whereas structural reform would require sustained investment, technical expertise, and the absorption of short-term political costs to achieve long-term gains. In Italy, 2025 demonstrated that the incentives for the governing coalition, which must manage incompatible constituencies, has instead pushed systematically towards symbolic intervention instead.

Italy between Washington and Brussels

The foreign policy performances documented by Bové Rud did not take place in a vacuum as demonstrated by Moschella's article on trade policy and the US tariff crisis of 2025. This analysis addresses the economic and diplomatic substance beneath the identity performances to explain Italy's behaviour in navigating the transatlantic disruption produced by the Trump administration's trade measures. Meloni's personal rapport with the new American administration, which Bové Rud identifies as a key resource in the domestic politics of the coalition, also functioned as a real diplomatic asset in the trade negotiations: during which Italy sought to use its position as a reliable Atlantic ally to help resolve what was fundamentally an EU-US dispute. Moschella shows that this positioning involved an embrace of European institutions as the appropriate framework for managing the transatlantic relationship, a posture that placed Meloni in tension with her coalition partners, notably Salvini's calls for direct bilateral negotiations bypassing Brussels. Yet this strategy also reveals the risks inherent in Meloni's performative politics. By presenting herself simultaneously as Trump's privileged interlocutor and as a defender of the EU's collective position, she sought to maintain credibility across multiple audiences. As Moschella demonstrates, however, Italy's interests ultimately depended on the EU framework, exposing the fragility of a political performance that attempted to reconcile sovereigntist symbolism with what she calls strategic Europeanism. The result was a delicate balancing act that risked generating conflicting expectations among domestic supporters, coalition partners, and European allies. At the same time, it epitomizes the dilemmas of contemporary Europe, where 'collective action [depends] on contingent alignments of national interests rather than on a durable commitment to shared political purposes': a condition that neither the Russian threat nor the gradual political and military disengagement of the United States from Europe has thus far been sufficient to overcome.

The security dimension of the same transatlantic stress is the subject of Termine and Natalizia's article on defence policy as an instrument of burden-sharing within NATO. The Trump administration's second term renewed the pressure on European allies to increase their defence contributions, and Italy, like most continental partners, faced the challenge of responding to demands for higher defence

spending within severe fiscal constraints. Termine and Natalizia show that Meloni's Atlantic loyalty operated here simultaneously as a constraint, involving commitments that could not easily be abandoned, and as a diplomatic lever, as Italian reliability on NATO commitments opened channels for negotiating the pace and composition of increased spending. Importantly, Termine and Natalizia portray this trajectory less as a partisan innovation than as a continuation of a strategy already established under Mario Draghi. The strengthening of Italy's Atlantic commitments, the gradual increase in defence spending, and the use of military policy as a means of reinforcing Rome's standing in Washington all predated Meloni's arrival in office. What distinguished her government was the more explicit integration of these policies into a broader strategy of political accreditation with the United States. Yet the article also raises questions about the sustainability of this approach. Italy formally reached the NATO benchmark of 2% of GDP in 2025, but largely through a revised accounting framework that broadened the categories of expenditure included in the calculation. As the Alliance moves towards the much more ambitious 5% target, the gap between formal compliance and substantive resource mobilization may become increasingly difficult to bridge, particularly given Italy's persistent fiscal constraints.

The intersection of these two articles illustrates one of the recurring structural political themes of the special issue: Italy in 2025 was managing a version of the classic three-circles problem, navigating its Atlantic commitments, its European obligations, and its own domestic fiscal and political constraints at the same time, and doing so in a period of acute transatlantic instability that made the standard equilibria more difficult to maintain. The irreconcilable nature of these three demands effectively ensured a tendency towards performative rather than transformative politics.

Structural economic failure and its political management

Italy's structural economic vulnerabilities are approached in this special issue from two interconnected angles: the erosion of the social and demographic foundations of growth, and the governance of the financial system through which investment and economic transformation are supposed to occur. Together, they illustrate the gap between the recognition of structural constraints and the limited capacity of politics to address them in transformative – as opposed to performative – ways.

The article by Massagli and Seghezzi (Chapter 5), focusing on demographic change, labour market transformation, and the wage question, presents a picture of structural dysfunction the political management of which forms a particularly clear example of the performative-transformative gap. The data are stark: Italy's real wage purchasing power has fallen by nearly nine percentage points over 15 years, a trajectory with no parallel among comparable Western economies. Employment has grown, but in low-value-added jobs as firms respond to post-pandemic demand by expanding headcount rather than investing in productivity-enhancing process innovation. Moreover, the demographic contraction is accelerating. The 35- to 49-year-old cohort has already shrunk by more than 17 percent since 2014, Italy's median age is the highest in the European Union, and projections suggest the country will lose more than four and a half million employed workers by 2050 at current participation rates. The immigration that could partially

compensate for this contraction is politically blocked by the nationalist electoral logic of the coalition parties.

Massagli and Seghezzi use two landmark events of 2025 as their diagnostic anchors. In May, the CISL-promoted citizens' initiative law on worker participation entered into force. In June, the CGIL's referendum targeting key provisions of the 2015 Jobs Act failed to reach the quorum, with turnout below 30 percent on all questions. Together, these two events constitute what the authors identify as a structural signal indicating that the traditional tools of organized labour mobilization have lost their reach in a workforce that is more mobile, more fragmented, and less institutionally anchored than at any point in the post-war period. The participation law is soft law, entirely promotional and non-binding, leaving all implementation to collective bargaining. It signals a preferred model of labour relations without delivering the structural wage recovery that would require a new tripartite agreement of the order of the 1993 Ciampi Protocol. The referendum's failure was less a political defeat for the CGIL than an indication of a transformation in the social structure of the Italian labour force that renders twentieth-century mobilization strategies largely ineffective.

The banking and financial dimension of Italy's political economy is examined by Fantacci and Galeone (Chapter 7), whose analysis of the governance of the Italian financial system reveals the growing intertwining of market dynamics and political intervention in the restructuring of Italian banking. The reconfiguration of the sector, driven by consolidation pressures and the Government's preference for a specific configuration of national financial champions, generated tensions with European institutions and ultimately infringement proceedings from the European Commission. Yet the significance of the article extends beyond the conflict between Rome and Brussels. More fundamentally, it reopens a longstanding question in Italian political economy: who controls the allocation of financial resources and to what end? The consolidation of the banking sector, the construction of national champions, and the Government's increasing reliance on informal influence and regulatory instruments point to a renewed politicization of finance. Rather than a simple conflict between national policy preferences and EU rules, the article highlights competing visions of how savings, credit, and investment should be governed, and whether the banking system should primarily serve market efficiency, national strategic objectives, territorial development, or broader public interests.

The judiciary, the penal state, and the limits of institutional reform

The Government's conflict with the Italian judiciary is among the most structurally consequential dynamics documented in this special issue. Cavallini and Dallara provide the historical and institutional architecture for understanding a conflict the surface features of which have been a constant of Italian centre-right politics for three decades, but the underlying mechanisms have shifted in important ways. Under Berlusconi, the government-judiciary conflict was primarily personal, a series of legislative interventions designed to resolve the specific judicial problems of a sitting prime minister. Under Meloni, the conflict has shifted from the personal to the policy focused, with the Italy-Albania Protocol for the offshore processing of asylum seekers providing the most acute flashpoint. Several judges invalidated the protocol on the grounds of EU and

international law, triggering a direct confrontation between governmental executive authority and judicial interpretive authority.

The Nordio constitutional reform[3] was the Government's structural response to what it identified as a decades-old institutional dysfunction: the concentration of formal independence, factional capture, and unaccountable criminal policy discretion in a prosecutorial system that is a Western outlier in its insulation from democratic oversight. Cavallini and Dallara provide an analysis of what the reform would actually have changed (separating careers between judges and prosecutors, creating two independent CSMs, introducing random selection – *sorteggio* – for CSM membership, and establishing an external high disciplinary court), as well as what it would have left untouched (primarily the prosecutors' effective discretion over criminal policy priorities). The authors note that the Palamara scandal of 2019 to 2020, which made the systematic factional bargaining over judicial appointments visible to the public, demonstrated that the magistracy could not self-reform. The *sorteggio* was designed to be a structural response to this failure. Whether it would have produced the intended result remains unclear.

Curreri's article on security policy examines a related dynamic in a different context. The April 2025 *decreto sicurezza*, which introduced thirty-nine articles of criminal law changes including 11 new offences, nine penalty increases, and further restrictions on alternative sentencing, is situated by Curreri in a longer trajectory of what he describes as the Government's 'conditioned reflex' approach to security. Each emotionally charged criminal incident, whether the Cutro shipwreck, child abuse cases in Caivano, or intensifying wildfires, is followed as a matter of course by new criminal legislation. Curreri's term '*panpenalismo*' captures the idea behind this approach, which employs criminal law as the primary instrument for managing social problems rather than as a supplement to structural social policy. The article identifies the internal limits of this strategy with considerable precision. New offences overburden an already strained prosecutorial and judicial system, producing the counterproductive effect of slowing proceedings on the most serious cases and intensifying prison overcrowding.[4]

Curreri's analysis also places security policy in the context of coalition management: the Government's commitment to 'zero tolerance' and its persistent criminalization of protest served both as a distinctive electoral offering of the centre -right coalition and as a site for performative differentiation within it, with Meloni stressing institutional order and national security while the rhetoric of anti-immigration criminalization connected to the Lega's electoral base. As with reform of the judiciary, the performances are real and the legislative acts have at least the potential to have genuine effects. What they do not deliver is structural resolution of the social conditions that generate criminality and insecurity.

Civil rights, end-of-life, and the politics of inaction

Bucalo, Craxì, and Tripodi examine the Meloni government's handling of civil rights, taking the debate over medically assisted dying as their primary case study. Their article is distinctive in this collection because its subject is not a domain where the Government has acted performatively in pursuit of its own agenda, but one where it has deployed what

the authors describe as passive resistance. This the authors define as a deliberate strategy of legislative inaction designed to avoid both the cost of complying with a constitutional jurisprudence it finds ideologically unacceptable and the cost of confronting that jurisprudence with legislation that would make the conflict explicit.

Within the article, the constitutional sequence is carefully reconstructed. The Constitutional Court has progressively elaborated a constitutionally protected framework for medically assisted dying under specified conditions, repeatedly urging the legislature to translate this jurisprudence into national statute and repeatedly being ignored. Seven years of legislative paralysis on one of the most significant civil rights questions of the contemporary period is itself a political act, and Bucalo, Craxì, and Tripodi analyse it as such. The Meloni government's inaction in the first part of its term was a form of ideological self-protection. Legislating in conformity with the Court's jurisprudence would have meant publicly endorsing a right to self-determination in end-of-life choices that the Government's value system formally rejects, while legislating against it would have risked both unconstitutionality and electoral exposure given polling data showing substantial popular support for assisted dying.

The dynamic changed in 2025 when regional legislatures, most notably Tuscany under a centre-left government, moved to fill the national legislative vacuum with regional laws implementing the Court's criteria. Pending the Constitutional Court's judgement (which at the end of 2025 would rule on the resulting constitutionality challenge, invalidating specific provisions of the Tuscan law, while affirming the region's capacity to legislate within strict limits), Tuscany's move effectively forced the Government's hand. As a result, a bill supported by the government was introduced in the Senate in July 2025 that formally claimed to implement the Court's criteria. Bucalo, Craxì, and Tripodi suggest that in reality the bill departed from the Court's criteria quite substantially, in particular, in its affirmation of the primacy of the right to life over the right to self-determination and its exclusion of national health service resources from the procedures. The article situates the end-of-life question within the broader context of the Government's restrictive approach to civil rights, including its 2024 extension of the ban on gestational surrogacy to acts committed abroad, and identifies in both cases the same structural pattern, a government committed to a traditionalist conception of life and family deploying its legislative authority, or its capacity for inaction, to narrow the space for individual self-determination in ways that the constitutional jurisprudence resists, but cannot fully override. In this case, the Meloni government's actions (or inaction) have direct political consequences, but these largely block or minimize the creation of transformative politics to maintain its public (performative) policy positions.

The sustainability of performative equilibrium

The nine articles gathered in this special issue do not converge on a single verdict about the Meloni government or about Italian politics in 2025. They examine different policy domains, deploy different analytical frameworks, and reach different conclusions about specific choices and outcomes. What they all point to is the persistence of a common underlying dynamic: a political system that is exceptionally capable of producing politically meaningful signals and significantly less capable of translating those signals into the structural changes that the signals claim to address.

This is not a failure in any simple sense. Sustaining in office a three-party coalition built upon different and often incompatible conceptions of sovereignty through the geopolitical turbulence of 2025 was a considerable political achievement. Italy's history of governmental instability gives this durability genuine value. The ability to navigate simultaneously between Washington and Brussels, between NATO obligations and fiscal constraints, between anti-immigration electoral positioning and the labour market needs of a shrinking workforce, requires sophisticated political management of the kind documented throughout this special issue. High political capacity is a real capacity. The question is whether it is sufficient, and sufficient for how long.

Bové Rud's analysis helps explain why this equilibrium proved so resilient. The coalition's internal contradictions were not resolved; rather, they were managed through a process of performative differentiation that allowed Fratelli d'Italia, the Lega, and Forza Italia to continue speaking to distinct constituencies while avoiding direct confrontation over policy outcomes. Foreign policy, European integration, and national sovereignty became particularly important arenas for this strategy because they generated substantial symbolic returns while imposing relatively limited immediate electoral costs. The stability of the coalition therefore depended not on ideological convergence, but on the successful management of ideological divergence through political performance. In this regard, from the vantage point of the subsequent developments in 2026, the articles in this special issue depict a political equilibrium approaching its limits.

The central argument advanced in this introduction is not that performative politics replaced governance, but that performative politics became a rational adaptation to conditions that made transformative politics increasingly difficult. Capano and Ghio provide a clear account of this adaptation. Their distinction between high political capacity and low analytical capacity captures a broader pattern visible across many of the domains examined in this special issue. The Meloni government repeatedly demonstrated an ability to construct politically effective narratives, maintain coalition cohesion, and identify electorally advantageous conflicts. What appears more difficult is the translation of those political successes into coherent strategies capable of altering the structural dynamics underlying the problems being addressed. The issue, in other words, is not an absence of governing capacity but an imbalance between the capacity to manage politics and the capacity to transform policy environments.

Yet rational adaptations can themselves generate cumulative costs. The events of 2026 suggest that some of those costs have begun to materialize.

The first category concerns the accumulation of unresolved economic constraints. Italy entered 2026 with public finances still heavily constrained by a deficit exceeding 3% of GDP and a debt burden that sharply limits discretionary spending. Throughout the special issue, structural economic problems repeatedly appear as issues that governments can manage politically but struggle to resolve substantively. Massagli and Seghezzi demonstrate that demographic decline, labour market fragmentation, and wage stagnation are not temporary imbalances but long-term trends that threaten the productive foundations of the Italian economy. The contradiction is particularly striking in the field of migration. While the Government continued to employ restrictive rhetoric as a core component of its electoral identity, it simultaneously expanded legal migration channels through successive *decreti flussi*, implicitly recognizing the impossibility of sustaining

economic activity without foreign labour. The result is a gap between symbolic positioning and structural necessity that can be managed politically but not eliminated.

Fantacci and Galeone identify a similar tension in the financial sphere. Their analysis shows a government seeking to shape the ownership structure of Italian banking through informal influence, regulatory leverage, and the promotion of national champions. Yet the developments of 2026 suggest the limits of this strategy. Banking consolidation continued to evolve according to market dynamics, European regulatory constraints, and shareholder interests that only partially coincided with governmental preferences. The deeper question raised by the article therefore remains unresolved: whether the politicization of finance can provide a coherent developmental strategy or merely a temporary mechanism for influencing outcomes in a sector increasingly shaped by forces beyond national control.

A second category of cost concerns institutional relationships. Cavallini and Dallara demonstrate that the conflict between government and judiciary is not simply a dispute over individual rulings but a manifestation of a deeper institutional imbalance that successive governments have struggled to address. The constitutional reform proposed by Minister Nordio sought to alter the relationship between politics and the judiciary, yet the conflict itself intensified throughout 2025 and into 2026. The debate surrounding the constitutional referendum transformed a complex institutional question into another arena of symbolic confrontation, reinforcing political identities while leaving unresolved the underlying tension between judicial independence, democratic accountability, and prosecutorial discretion. Institutional conflicts of this kind are particularly resistant to performative management because they concern the rules through which political authority itself is exercised.

The third category involves Italy's international credibility. The articles by Moschella and by Termine and Natalizia show how foreign and security policy became central arenas in which the Government sought simultaneously to reassure allies, preserve domestic consensus, and maintain coalition unity. During 2025 this balancing act appeared remarkably successful. Yet credibility is ultimately judged not by performance alone but by the relationship between commitments and capabilities. The tensions that emerged in 2026 exposed some of the vulnerabilities already visible in the preceding year. The divergence between Meloni and Trump over the Iran crisis, coupled with Italy's limited influence over the subsequent diplomatic process, illustrated the limits of a strategy that relied heavily on personal political relationships. At the European level, Meloni's increasingly explicit embrace of a more Europeanist posture reflected many of the dynamics identified by Moschella under the label of strategic Europeanism. Yet this repositioning did not automatically translate into greater influence within European decision-making circles, where Italy remained only partially integrated into the informal leadership groups shaping major strategic choices.

A similar pattern emerges in defence policy. As Termine and Natalizia note, Italy formally achieved the NATO target of 2% of GDP devoted to defence expenditure in 2025, but largely through revised accounting criteria rather than a dramatic expansion of military resources. The controversy that surrounded subsequent discussions of the Alliance's new 5% target exposed the fragility of this achievement. What had functioned effectively as a political signal in 2025 became increasingly difficult to sustain once

translated into future spending commitments. Here again, performative success encountered structural constraints.

The final category of cost is the most uncertain but potentially the most consequential. It concerns the cumulative effects of what Curreri describes as *panpenalismo* and what Bucalo, Craxì, and Tripodi identify as a broader tendency towards restriction or containment in the field of civil rights. Both articles describe forms of politics that are highly effective at producing symbolic reassurance. New criminal offences, tougher penalties, restrictions on protest, resistance to judicial and constitutional pressures in matters of personal autonomy: all are politically legible and electorally resonant responses to public anxieties. Yet they are less effective in addressing the social conditions that generate insecurity or conflict in the first place. The passage of yet another security decree in 2026, despite persistent public dissatisfaction regarding the effectiveness of the previous measures, illustrates this dilemma clearly.[5] Repeated symbolic interventions risk generating diminishing political returns when citizens increasingly evaluate governments against lived outcomes rather than announced intentions.

No article in this special issue argues that Italian democracy is experiencing a fundamental breakdown. Elections remain competitive, governments govern, courts exercise independent review, and political conflict continues to unfold within democratic institutions. The concern that unites these contributions is different and more specific. It concerns the widening gap between the political system's demonstrated capacity to generate signals and its more limited capacity to produce structural change.

This distinction helps illuminate a final development that became increasingly visible during 2026: the emergence of new challengers within the right itself. The rise of Roberto Vannacci is significant not primarily because of his individual political prospects, but because of what it reveals about the logic of performative politics. Symbolic politics is inherently competitive. When political legitimacy is increasingly generated through signalling rather than transformation, actors who can produce more intense, more coherent, or more radical signals gain a structural advantage. The success of the Meloni government rested in part on its ability to absorb and manage the symbolic demands of diverse constituencies while remaining committed to approaches compatible with the institutional constraints of governing. Yet that very moderation creates opportunities for challengers who are unconstrained by the responsibilities of office and can therefore offer more uncompromising performances of sovereignty, identity, and national renewal.

The paradox is therefore that performative politics may contain the seeds of its own destabilization. If structural problems remain unresolved, symbolic satisfaction eventually becomes harder to sustain. Citizens may continue to endorse the values embodied in political performances while becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the outcomes associated with them. Under those conditions, pressure emerges either for more transformative forms of politics or for more radical forms of performance.

The articles included in this special issue do not offer a single diagnosis or a single prognosis. They offer something more valuable: a set of fine-grained analyses that, read together, reveal the logic of a political system navigating between the demands of signal production and the requirements of structural change. Italy in 2025 appears not as a democracy in crisis but as a democracy operating under conditions that increasingly

reward symbolic effectiveness over transformative capacity. Whether this equilibrium can remain politically sustainable as its costs accumulate is one of the central questions that the events of 2026 have begun to pose, and one that will shape the trajectory of Italian politics in the years ahead.

In June 2025, Leonardo Morlino passed away, a towering figure in the Italian political science community. The editors of this special issue remember him with gratitude and affection.

Notes

1. Populism is a specific ideological form, pitting a unified people against a corrupt elite; performative politics is a structural mode of governing that can operate through very different ideological registers, including technocratic ones.
2. An analysis of the impact of the European fiscal state focusing on the financial constraints imposed by EU commitments demonstrates the progressively depleted space within which national governments can pursue genuinely redistributive or transformative policies, creating incentives for national governments to govern through symbolic intervention rather than through the expenditure of real resources (Streeck 2016).
3. Approved by Parliament by a majority of its members in October 2025 and (unsuccessfully) submitted to a confirmatory referendum in March 2026.
4. Curreri also highlights that the fundamental premise of this approach to deterrence, that criminal behaviour responds primarily to the severity of penalties, rests on empirical assumptions the literature does not generally support, another instance of weak analytical underpinning of policy solutions.
5. According to a YouTrend poll for Sky TG24, released in February 2026, 48% of respondents rate the Meloni Government's approach to improving security in Italy, based on the introduction of new crimes, increased penalties for existing offences, and restrictive immigration measures, as 'Not very effective or not at all effective'. Meanwhile, 34% rate it as 'Very' or 'fairly effective', with 18%, responding 'Don't know'.

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