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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Waves in Cycle: The protests against anti-contagion measures and vaccination in Covid-19 times in Italy

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ABSTRACT: Since the beginning of the pandemic, while progressive movements have mainly focused on social inequalities exacerbated by the sanitary emergency, a number of protests emerged and quickly became visible that initially targeted the policies taken to reduce contagion and subsequently focused on the vaccine and vaccination. In the attempt to account for the rapid development of these protests, social scientists have mostly turned to classical approaches used in the analysis of far-right organizations and sects, looking at broad transformations in society or at fear and a sense of insecurity at the individual level. In this article, we build upon a social movement approach to look at the main characteristics of the protests against anti-contagion measures. From a theoretical point of view, we point to the importance of disentangling the specific waves happening within broader protest cycles. Empirically, focusing on the Italian case, we present a novel development in protest event analysis looking at the specific forms of action, the actors involved, and their claims in two waves of contention during the pandemic in Italy, between 2020 and 2021.

KEYWORDS: anti-contagion measures, Covid-19, Italy, protest event analysis, vaccination

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1. Introduction

The pandemic has been ripe with different forms of collective behavior. As “the most widespread and deadly world-wide pandemic since the Spanish Flu of 1918”, Covid-19 created a heightened sense of fear, which has been posited as one of the major reflex emotions associated with the emergence of a variety of so-called collective behaviors. Panic-buying extended from toilet paper to guns; rumors spread, public shaming was carried out both on and off-line. Furthermore, micro-conflicts developed in people’s everyday lives over the rules aimed at containing the pandemic and the appropriate behavior required in public spaces, with positions ranging from denialist to paranoid (Alteri et al. 2021). Some of these micro-conflicts at the individual level found resonance in collective mobilization against the public measures introduced to reduce contagion. Indeed, the most visible protests targeted the policies the various governments used in order to manage the sanitary emergency. While progressive movements mainly focused on social inequalities, often calling for investment in the public health system and vaccination for all (della Porta 2022a), protests also targeted the policies taken to reduce contagion, such as lockdowns, mask wearing, social distancing, contact reduction, vaccines and vaccination. Beginning in April 2020, “End the Lockdown” protests were held in the United States and several European countries. On 30 April 2020, a group of heavily armed men occupied the Michigan State Capitol to protest against lockdown measures. Similar protests, albeit without a show of guns, took place in Europe, with imitation dynamics first developing in Germany and then spreading to other countries. After a series of smaller protests had taken place at the local level, on 1 August 2020, a crowd of 17,000 people marched in Berlin to protest against the lockdown, the compulsory wearing of masks and social distancing (Teune 2021a). In the United Kingdom, anti-lockdown protests were organized by the UK Freedom Movement, first at Hyde Park in May 2020, with a larger protest subsequently taking place in August 2020. In Italy, one of the first protests against the Covid-19 lockdown took place on 31 May 2020 as a former Carabinieri colonel, Antonio Pappalardo, peddled dubious claims about the high incidence of Covid-19 in the Lombardy region as a result of the high concentration of 5G antennas in the area (Gerbaudo 2020).

By empirically analyzing the protests against measures aimed at containing contagion in the Italian case, this paper aims to contribute to early research that has started to shed light on the characteristics of these mobilization in various countries, looking in particular at their organizations and forms of action. Aside from an in-depth description of this component of the contentious politics of the pandemic, this contribution can be located within the analysis of the dynamics of cycles of protests, in that it discussed some of the main hypotheses that have been developed in the field. In fact, it is suggested that a focus on the meso, collective level of protest can usefully complement interpretations that have previously been proposed at the micro, individual level or at the macro, contextual level.

In what follows, firstly a summary of previous studies addressing protests during the pandemic will be outlined, along with the conceptual framework on the waves of contention. After a short methodological note, the main characteristics of the protests in terms of timing and intensity will be presented. This will be followed by an examination of the empirical data on firstly the time and evolution of the protests, secondly of the actors that took part in them and finally the forms of action. It will be shown how there was a significant level of diversity between the two waves of protest analyzed, which were notably separated by a low ebb.

2. Protest cycles and waves of contention during the pandemic

Social science explanations for the protests against anti-contagion measures (from lockdowns to masks and social distancing, up to and including vaccination), often referred to in the media as anti-vax protests and connected in sociological analyses to previous waves of anti-vax mobilization, have been particularly rooted in approaches that resonate with those used in the analysis of radical right-wing organizations and sects rather than those used in the studies of progressive social movements. However, while investigating the specificity of these types of protests when compared with those developed by progressive actors (della Porta 2022a), it can be expected that concepts and theories developed in social movement studies might indeed be useful in order to at least integrate explanations that have developed within other fields of studies and, often, different disciplines. This is especially the case given the fact that although initially characterized as more spontaneous forms of reaction launched at the local level by those most economically affected by anti-contagion measures or more concerned with issues of individual freedom, in several countries protests quickly became structured, with an increasing investment of organizational resources by radical right-wing actors in particular. Therefore, by investigating the evolution of protests over time through a social movements lens it will be possible to single out the format of the protest events across different waves of contention.

At the contextual, macro-level, protests against anti-contagion measures have been explained with reference to, on the one hand, a right-wing backlash and, on the other, broad transformations in society. These include increased mistrust in politics and politicians, the use of social media as the main communication channel, and radical forms of individualism bridged with a tendency towards post-truth beliefs. If we look at the political system, research has often pointed to the role played by radical right-wing actors in support of anti-vax protests. Although their positions and behaviour have varied as the pandemic has progressed, radical right-wing parties have provided important political opportunities for the spread of conspiracy theories and anti-vaccination positions in many countries, often associating Covid-19 with immigration, especially “illegal” immigration, as well as with ethnic minorities or even going so far as to deny its existence altogether (Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2020; Wondreys and Mudde 2020). In countries where populist right-wing leaders were in power, they were often seen to support anti-vax protests in various way; the most visible examples of this are Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump, who have been prominent pandemic deniers and have openly opposed policies aimed at controlling the virus (Galanopoulos and Venizelos 2021), as well as funding anti-vax organizations (Snow and Bernatzky 2022). Radical right-wing heads of state also called into question the credibility of scientists and doctors through the mobilization of an alt-science network, in what have been defined as medical populist performances (Barros Leal Farias, Casarões and Magalhães 2022). In some countries, the radical right also allied with the most conservative sections of the church in the spreading of anti-vax conspiracies. Anti-vax protests have been seen as confirming a normalization (Wodak 2019) of the radical right, due to the fact that other actors participating in the protests generally seemed happy to express solidarity with their neo-fascist allies (on the German case, see Vieten 2020).

The concept of populism has also been associated with the spread of anti-vax protests given its association with institutional mistrust and rejection of expert knowledge. In general, it has been noted that “[c]ritics of Corona restrictions have sought to bring together these forms of protopopulist discontent in a counter-narrative according to which misguided and out-of-touch experts, power-hungry regulators, and excessively risk-averse elites have combined to wreck the economy, destroy livelihoods, and trample on liberties” (Brubaker 2020). Furthermore, from an empirical perspective, mistrust has been connected to the anti-vax position. Research carried out in Europe has indicated that compliance with policies aimed at containing the spread of the virus correlated with levels of trust in policymakers prior to the crisis (Bargain and Aminjonov 2020), while the

same is also true for trust in the press (Brodeur, Grigoryeva and Kattan 2020) and trust in science (Bicchieri et al. 2020; Charron, Gautier and Jestin 2020). As has also been found in the dismissal of anthropogenic explanations for global warming, there is a strong correlation between populist attitudes and anti-scientific beliefs, with experts considered to be part of the elite or at least subordinated to it and its assumed interests (Galanopoulos and Venizelos 2021; Barros Leal Farias, Casarões and Magalhães 2022). Beliefs in denialist positions on the very existence of a pandemic have been linked to specific critiques of science, which address “the alleged dogmatism of modern science, the intimate relation of scientific knowledge production with vested interests, and the exclusion of lay knowledge by scientific experts forming a global ‘power elite’” (Harambam and Aupers 2015).

At a micro-level, different forms of individual distress, as well as fear and a sense of insecurity have been mentioned as plausible interpretations. Psychological readings of those who refuse to undergo vaccination have pointed to issues such as cognitive closure and conspiracy mentality. A conspiracy mentality interacts with a mistrusting mind-set, triggered by a defensive response of wariness, given perceived vulnerability and a sense of assaultment. In many cases, a situation of perceived danger fuels this process (Freeman et al. 2022). Conspiracy mentalities have been defined as cumulative, resulting in a situation where “holding one conspiracy belief raises the likelihood of unrelated conspiracy beliefs and that individuals can simultaneously endorse mutually incompatible conspiracy beliefs” (Freeman et al. 2022). More widely, narcissistic gratification has been mentioned as a motivating factor, as “being the bearer of knowledge about secret conspiracies and systems of power, and the feeling of having access to destiny or a divine nature, make it possible to see oneself as part of an elite that – in contrast to the ‘sleeping’ masses – is ‘awakened’” (Schließler, Hellweg and Decker 2020). Fear has been linked to the global spread of conspiracy beliefs during the pandemic, combining fake news on vaccines with attacks against generically defined global elites, as well as those citizens who obey orders. In particular, coronavirus conspiracy beliefs have ascribed malevolent intent to certain individuals, groups, and organizations, applying pre-existing prejudices to new situations, and have been combined with anti-Semitic and racist conspiracy theories. Conspiracy narratives were bridged with esoteric beliefs, meaning that “the assumption of an international vaccination cartel led by Bill Gates can [...] explain, for example, why ‘suppressed knowledge’, for example about natural healing methods and the ineffectiveness or danger of vaccinations, is not made public” (Schließler, Hellweg and Decker 2020). Particularly notable examples of this are the conspiracy theory of the Great Replacement, which posits that evil global elites are encouraging migration in order to destroy the white race and Christianity as well as the QAnon conspiracy, which accuses a small (progressive) elite of being Satanists and abusing children (Rafael 2021).

General societal trends and individual propensity are important factors to consider when explaining anti-vax protests. In social movement studies, political and discursive opportunities have, in fact, been central concepts for the understanding of the development of social movements, and individual choices have been analyzed when explaining paths to recruitment and sustained commitment. As social movement studies suggest, however, in order to connect structure and individual grievances to collective action one needs to investigate the ways in which actors express their claims, how they organize and how they frame problems and solutions. Macro-trends are mediated by the dynamics of the protest waves, with their organization and framing.

Social movement studies have paid particular attention to protest, noting that protest events tend to cluster in time and space; cycle, waves, campaigns, and tides are concepts developed in order to define “a punctuated history of heightened challenges and relative stability” (Beissinger 2002, 16). One of the first concepts introduced in social movement studies in order to describe this phenomenon is that of the protest cycle, defined as “a phase of heightened conflict and contention across the social system that includes: a rapid diffusion of

collective action from more mobilized to less mobilized sectors; a quickened pace of innovation in the forms of contention; new or transformed collective action frames; a combination of organised and unorganised participation; and sequences of intensified inter-actions between challengers and authorities which can end in reform, repression and sometimes revolution” (Tarrow 1994, 153). Protests are not distributed randomly over time and space but instead linked sequentially to one another across time and space: “in the narrative of the struggles that accompany them, in the altered expectations that they generate about subsequent possibilities to contest; in the changes that they evoke in the behavior of those forces that uphold a given order, and in the transformed landscape of meaning that events at times fashion” (Beissinger 2002, 17). As will be noted in this contribution, cycles include specific waves, that is protests focusing on similar claims within shorter time periods.

As cycles are produced by the contentious mobilization of multiple and varied actors, they involve various specific waves of protests focusing on similar aims. During cycles, protest rises and falls following a number of specific sequences, moving “from institutional conflict to enthusiastic peak to ultimate collapse” (Tarrow 1994, 168). Mechanisms of imitation, competition and reciprocal learning regularly occur, triggering the intensification and de-intensification of protest. During the ascending phases, precipitating circumstances produce a radical destabilization of social relations within a polity, and the increased unpredictability of interactions favors the diffusion of protest, as movements borrow (successful) inventions from each other (Koopmans 2004). By demonstrating the vulnerability of the authorities, the first movements to emerge lower the cost of collective action for other actors (Tarrow 1994). Through a process of imitation and learning, spin-off movements mobilize, sometimes in alliance with, sometimes in opposition to the previous movements (della Porta and Tarrow 1986). Organizational dynamics are also involved. Social movement organizations cooperate and compete with each other, investing resources to intensify mobilization. Protest cycles unavoidably decline, however, often giving way to processes of institutionalization and radicalization. Authorities tend to increase repression, but also to learn how to better target such repression against emerging actors; forms of protest which were once innovative tend to lose their newsworthiness; activists are often disappointed and return to private life. However, the evolution of the cycle of contention varies as it is influenced by the specific dynamics of protest waves within it.

In this contribution, the aim is to zoom in on the cycle of protest that developed within the pandemic (della Porta 2022a), singling out the waves of contention that targeted anti-contagion measures. An investigation into their evolution over time makes it possible to both single out the different composition and formats in different waves, as well as various elements of continuity. These would seem all the more relevant in order to assess two of the main characteristics observed in previous research, namely the heterogeneity of the actors involved and their radical potentials.

With regard to the former, a typical image of the abovementioned protests is their heterogeneity. In the US, “the protestors have been described as populated by anti-vaccination activists, gun rights advocates, adherents of the QAnon conspiracy theory, members of private armed militias, and Trump supporters” (Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2020). Similarly, in Germany, the protests were described by social movement scholars in light of the following characteristics: “(1) The heterogeneity of the groups involved in the protests, from bourgeois Green voters to cranky hippies to staunch neo-Nazis. (2) The mixing ratios of these groups, which vary greatly from place to place, which do not produce a clear overall picture, but rather resemble a view through a kaleidoscope. (3) The diverse and sometimes contradictory use of symbols, which questions the usual attributions of meaning. And (4) the sometimes difficult to understand patterns of interpretation that drive the protests and prompted many participants to radically reject political institutions in a short space of time” (Teune 2021b). In other European countries, the protests have also been seen to include a mix of the ‘exoteric

milieu' and radical right-wing activists, with some promoters openly endorsing QAnon conspiracies and moving towards a broad acceptance of an alliance, and with the radical right providing important organizational resources.

Moreover, in early research, anti-vax protests emerged as characterized by confrontational strategies. It has been noted that “The tactics adopted by protesters revolve around upsetting lockdown measures by the very fact of gathering in public space, without wearing protective equipment as a means of provocation. The flouting of mask-wearing and social distancing norms becomes in-and-of-itself a means through which non-compliance with government regulations and criticism at the management of the pandemic, and its economic consequences, can be aired. Besides collective protest events, this type of non-compliant behavior has also taken the form of individualized protests, with several reports of individuals getting into arguments with police, shop-owners, and other citizens because of their refusal to wear masks when entering shops and public premises” (Gerbaudo 2020). In the US, “many of the protests feature demonstrators wielding semi-automatic rifles and other firearms, meant as symbols of popular sovereignty against the perceived oppression of government elites” (Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2020). Moreover, the contentious repertoire included actions “that disrupt or obstruct vaccination sites; attempts to sabotage vaccine doses; and reactionary legislative efforts prohibiting localities, schools and private businesses from enforcing mask usage guidelines, vaccine requirements, or policies to verify an individual’s Covid-19 vaccination status” (Snow and Bernatzky 2022). In Germany, while the protests were initially mainly peaceful, they also escalated into more radical forms of confrontation, especially when the far right became more involved. This reached its climax on 29 August 2020 in Berlin as hundreds of protesters — many with visible extreme right-wing symbols – tried to “storm” the Reichstag. Thus, “self-stylization as resistance fighters and at the same time victims of a perfidious system has not only strengthened the cohesion between very different groups in the lateral thinking protests, but has also made the use of violence plausible and conceivable for many. From the very beginning, fantasies of violence and punishment have been part of the exaggeration of infection protection measures as a ‘corona dictatorship’” (Teune 2021b).

In what follows, data from protest event analysis in the Italian case will be used to look at the actors and repertoires of action of protests against contagion measures and their evolution in time.

3. Methodological note

The main empirical source for the study presented in this article is protest event analysis, which is a quantitative methodology that is widely used to study the dynamics of protest in both time and space. As synthesized by Koopmans and Rucht, protest event analysis “is a method that allows for the quantification of many properties of protest, such as frequency, timing and duration, location, claims, size, forms, carriers, and targets, as well as immediate consequences and reactions (e.g., police intervention, damage, counter protests)” (2002, 231). In general, daily press reports represent the main source for the analysis, as articles on protest are found and coded following specific methods of content analysis (Lindekilde 2014; Kriesi et al. 1995; Hutter 2014). In this process, the primary unit of analysis is the protest event, and information is collected on indicators that usually include the actors who protest, the forms they use, their claims, and their targets, as well as the place, time, and immediate outcomes of the event.

While extremely helpful in defining broad trends in protest, protest event analysis must be handled with care (Hutter 2014) as the reporting of protests is quite selective. This selectivity is often a source of bias, as the portion of the universe of protest events that is reported is never a representative (nor a random) sample

but rather – by its nature – influenced by media logic. In this sense, not only do events that mobilize large number of protestors, use the most innovative forms, or escalate into violence have a higher chance of being reported, but the claims on which people mobilize can be more or less newsworthy (McCarthy, McPhail, and Smith 1996; Fillieule and Jimenez 2003; Hutter 2014). Reporting can also be more or less detailed and neutral according to the characteristics of the actors and forms of actions. Additionally, the more frequent the protest becomes, the more selective its reporting will be.

While acknowledging these biases, researchers have noted that as protest is an act of communication, protest event analysis captures those events that have already overcome an initial important threshold in influencing public opinion and policymakers: being reported upon (Rucht, Hocke and Ohlemacher 1992). Moreover, as with any source, it is necessary to be self-reflexive in the interpretation of the data, while the newspaper-based protest event analysis must be triangulated with the reporting of protests in other sources.

For the present research, protest event analysis has been performed for the period April 2020–December 2021 (01.04.2020–31.12.2021). This timeframe starts with the first lockdown in Italy – which officially began on 9 March 2020 – and the onset of the first protests in April 2020 and ends on 31 December 2021, making it possible to observe the evolution of the protest waves throughout an almost two-year period. Following an established practice in protest event analysis (Hutter 2014), events have been systematically searched on the Italian daily newspaper *La Repubblica* (national pages) using the search string “(Protest* OR manifest*) AND (lockdown OR no vax* OR vaccin* OR chiusur* OR Green pass*)”. *La Repubblica* has been selected (as has been often the case in research based on protest event analysis in Italy) as it has an extensive and deep coverage of protest events, given the fact that the national pages tend to report the news also present in the different local editions of the same newspaper (i.e. Rome, Milan, Bari, Bologna, Florence, Genoa, Naples, Palermo, Parma, and Turin). The search through a list of keywords strings is consistent with previous research using protest event analysis (Hutter 2014); the specific strings aim at retrieving a wide variety of protest forms and events involving the topics of vaccination, lockdown and containment measures, business closures, as well as the vaccination certificate (Green Pass). A sample search on selected local editions (Rome, Milan, Genoa, Naples, Turin) revealed no additional cases to those already included in the database of events reported in the national edition. The pertinent articles were then selected, and all events found were coded (N = 114) using a codebook. Specifically, information has been coded on the date and place of the events, the forms of action, the organizers, the number of participants, the claims and the target.

In order to control for the selection bias of the protest event analysis, we also consulted some of the websites and social media pages of the main protest coordinating bodies (such as Fronte del Dissenso, Dissent Front). In addition to the protest event analysis conducted through quantitative techniques, the data was also triangulated through a qualitative analysis of other newspaper articles and news feeds with open search by forms of action, which made it possible to enrich the description of the protest events, most notably when reporting information on the repertoires of action. In addition to this, video content analysis was performed. As research on social movement communication has often noted, social movement activists are (increasingly) using cameras to record protest events as well as often posting their videos on social media and various other platforms. In addition, journalists also tend to use visuals to an ever-greater extent in their coverage of protests, publishing videos about contentious events on the websites of newspapers. In this context, video analysis can greatly contribute to both ethnographic approaches (by allowing for a broadening of the events covered and a reduction of costs) as well as protest event analysis, making it possible to integrate the written coverage by journalists, which is often very short and, of course, largely mediated by the journalists’ consideration of the newsworthiness of the topic, as well as the information available to the journalists themselves (della Porta 2022b).

The video content analysis of four major protest events covering different periods supplements a qualitative dimension to our analysis. The videos were sampled based on their availability online and the saliency of the events recorded, covering the period of fall 2020, spring 2021, and two events for the fall 2021, allowing us to

extend the analysis over the two main waves. The videos were uploaded by the protest organizers themselves, on their social media pages, or by reporters through the *Local Team* platform, a public and free online video platform for live images of different types of events taking place in Italy. In total, 25 videos were sampled and analyzed, varying in length from 2 minutes to 2 hours. For the video analysis, a specific “Observation template for virtual ethnography and content analysis” was created (della Porta 2022b). The data thus collected on banners, slogans, chants, and speeches provide information on the self-representation of the protestors as well as the diagnostic and prognostic frames relating to the pandemic. Video analysis also made it possible to obtain some information on the participants in the events as well as on the general atmosphere, while also being able to collect data resembling more “classical” content analysis.

4. The protests in time and space

The analysis of the protests singles out a marked diversity in the distribution and intensity of collective action in the broad period addressed. First of all, the protests were characterized by *frequent fluctuations*, which also point to the presence of two major waves of contention separated by a period of low ebb (Figure 1a): the first wave from April to December 2020, and the second wave from July to December 2021. Indeed, after the first lockdown in March and April 2020, the protests initially became more visible as vigils, and then marches were organized in several cities across Italy. Initially small and localized, they occasionally grew in size as the first national protest events were organized, only to decline cyclically in parallel with the reduction in the rate of contagion. The first wave of contestation is therefore characterized by protests against anti-contagion measures, such as the compulsory wearing of face masks, but especially against specific lockdown measures. In particular, protests intensified first in the fall of 2020 (Figure 1a, October-December 2020), with marches against the introduction of new lockdowns taking place at a local level, including some cases of escalation in fights between the protestors and the police, which albeit remained short and sporadic.

The second wave of contestation is mostly centered on protests against the vaccination campaign and the vaccination certificate. After a long period of low mobilization between January and June 2021, when some of the previous claims had been met through the policy of state economic support, protests escalated once again, especially against the decision taken by the government in the summer of 2021 to require a Green Pass (Covid-19 vaccination certificate) to access public places and business and subsequently of selective compulsory vaccination (Figure 1a, July-September 2021). Indeed, it is in the second half of 2021 that most of the marches and protest events took place, with a growing participation in the months of October-December (Figure 1b). The protests had already become intense in the summer of 2021, as the mandatory use of the vaccination certificate was progressively extended to more contexts, such as sport events, music festivals, bars and restaurants, gyms, and long-distance public transportation. On 24 July 2021, protests were carried out in Naples, Turin, Milan, Genoa and Rome, with the participation of around 3,000 people chanting “Freedom”, “No Green Pass!”, and “Down with the dictatorship!”. Starting from 15 October 2021, the Green Pass mandate was extended to all workplaces.

Figure 1a. Number of protest events by quarter

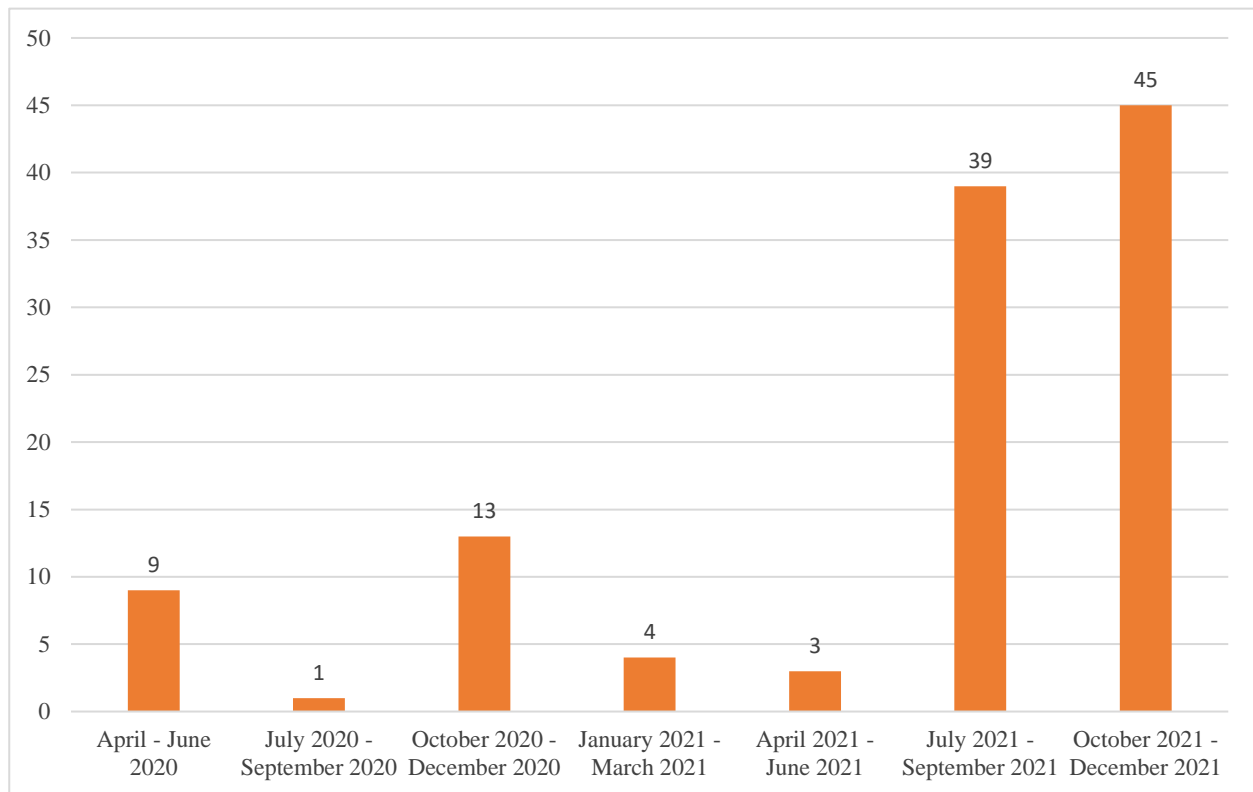
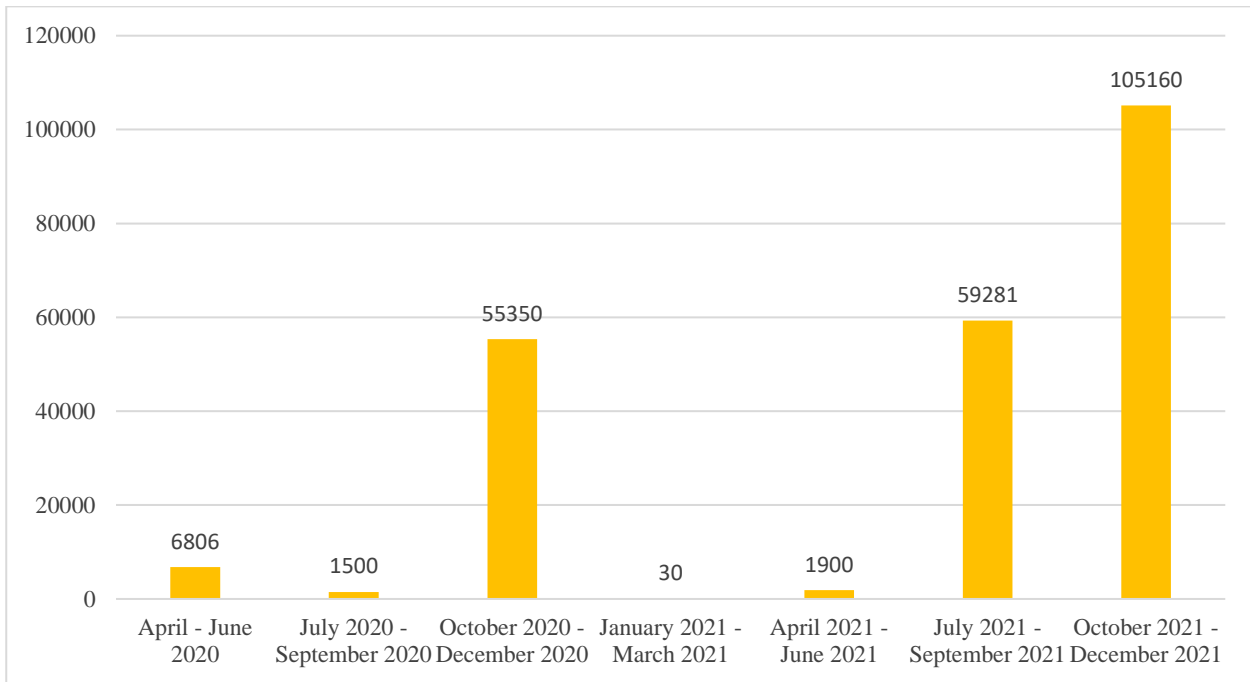
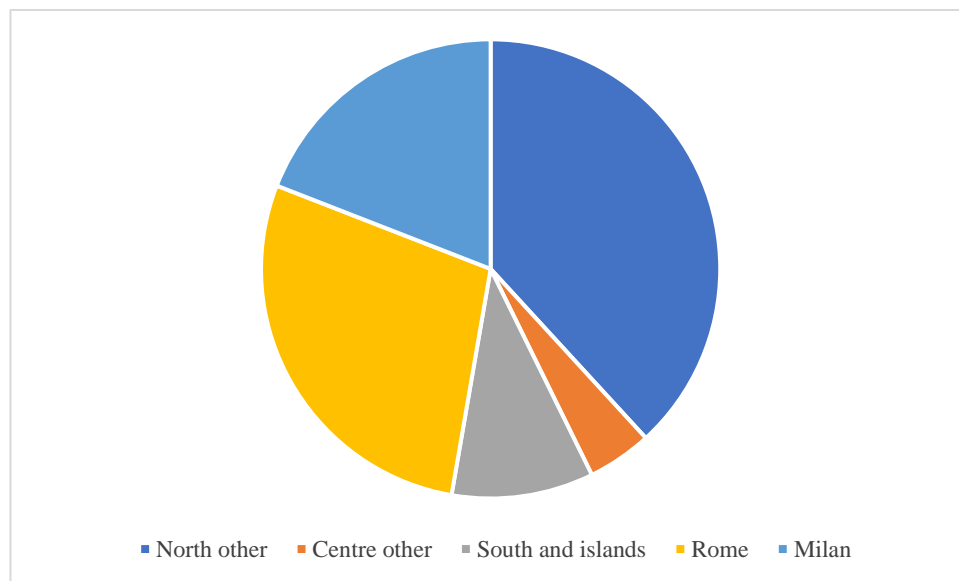


Figure 1b. Total number of participants by quarter



Secondly, the protests were *mainly local and territorially concentrated*, with a few, albeit significant, national events. The majority of the protests took place in the North of Italy, with events concentrated in Milan, but also in the capital, Rome, in the center of Italy (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Geographical distribution of the events



5. Organizers and claims

Heterogeneity was also noted in relation to the protest actors, as the *organizers of the protests changed in terms of social and political groups*, with considerable differences in the two waves also noted here. Initially more spontaneous, they first involved the social groups most affected by the measures to control the pandemic, with a subsequent shift to mainly ideological opponents of vaccination during the second wave. Politically, there was also an increasing influence of the radical right in the organization of the protests, especially in cities such as Rome.

In the first wave of protest between April and December 2020, one can observe a mobilization of those social groups most heavily hit by the lockdown measures especially, with the online-coordinated organization of small local events. The organizers of these protests, which most of the time were launched online through social media platforms (i.e., Telegram), were often little-known groupings, with no official webpages or communication sites. At times they were joined by people belonging to the economic and work sectors that had been most affected by the lockdown (notably in the restaurant, entertainment and tourism sectors), but also by football ultras and (more rarely) by squatted social centers. However, these protests were not supported by the business associations of shop-owners, that instead employed other forms of symbolic actions (Figure 3, Figure 4).

These localized modes also continued to characterize the protests in the second wave in the summer and fall of 2021, with specific coordination groups forming in different cities (e.g., Variante Torinese for Turin or Libera Piazza Genova¹). In the later stages of the protest in particular, tiny anti-EU parties such as Italexit, Alternativa and Ancora Italia began to take the lead, as also shown by the video material analyzed here.

In the second half of 2021 especially, the protests were promoted by *ad-hoc* local committees, with some attempts at building national groups, which were often in competition with each other. Attempts at coordinating also emerged at a national level. This was the case of Basta Dittatura (No more dictatorship), which was founded in the summer of 2021 and organized a number of the protest marches in the fall 2021, as well as very aggressive campaigns against individual politicians and medical professionals, inciting people to publish the private addresses of their chosen targets online and to take part in (mostly failed) roadblocks. As early as September 2020, during the anti-mask protests in Rome, the slogan “We are the people” was imported from the German anti-vax protests.

Transnational protests remained very rare events. Despite the failure of the first attempt in Turin to follow the call for a World-Wide Demonstration (WWD), which had been launched in Germany on 20 March 2021, another call for transnationally coordinated protests was issued by Basta Dittatura on 24 July 2021. At a later stage the group even created and distributed visual material, including posters, its own symbol, or photos of the then prime minister Mario Draghi transfigured as Hitler. Moreover, according to some reports, instructions were given to bring children to the demonstrations in order to avoid police interventions, while contact with the press was strongly discouraged (Di Miceli 2021). The protest events were mainly announced on social media, and the promoters refused to inform the police authorities as required by law (Di Miceli 2021). On 1 September 2021, the group (which claimed to have 40,000 online subscribers) called for railway stations to be blocked in 54 cities, without, however, succeeding in blocking any of them. The Telegram account of the organization was eventually closed on 28 September 2021, when the judiciary started to investigate some members of the group on the basis that they were accused of incitement to commit a crime, persecutory acts, aggravated threats, defamation and harassment. However, similar groups reemerged on Telegram (such as

¹ A similar purpose had the local groups such as No Paura Day, active in Cesena, with a Facebook account that posts calls to and pictures of protests (characterized by small groups of relatively old-aged protestors).

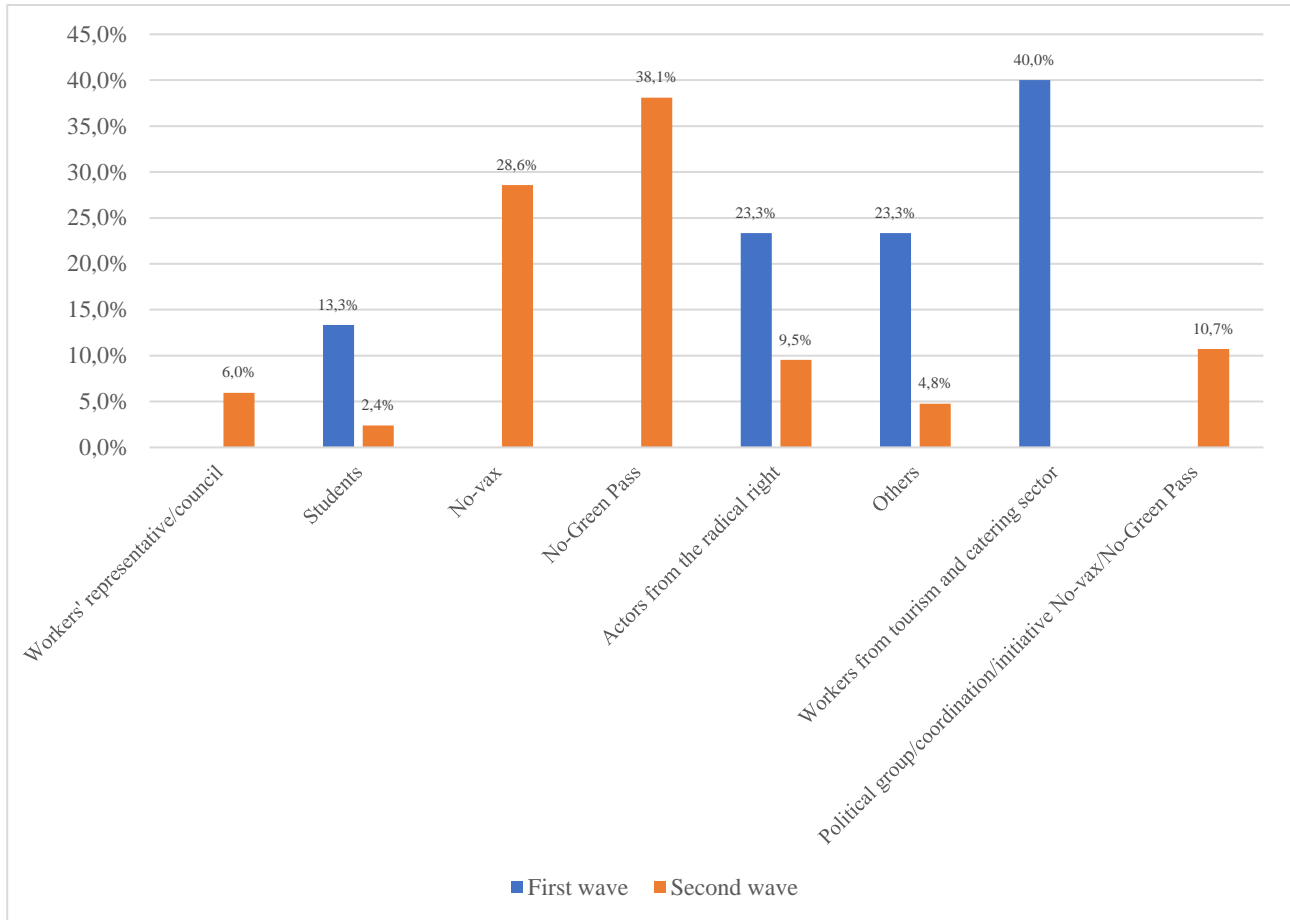
“Basta Dittatura Ufficiale”) and continued to publish information relating to the private addresses and private lives of doctors and elected politicians (Open, 13/12/2021).

Another, competing, umbrella organization with a more political orientation was the abovementioned Fronte del Dissenso (Dissent Front), which aimed to create a convergence of various groups under slogans such as ending the dictatorship and reestablishing constitutional freedom. Founded in 2021, the organization saw the convergence of various anti-EU groups (including splinter groupings from The League and the 5 Star Movement) calling for “national sovereignty” and the “defense of the fatherland”. As shown by the video analysis of the group’s “constitutive event”, held in Rome in April 2021, one can clearly perceive an explicit attempt at building coordination among different organizations at the national level. Among the groups participating in the event were the *Alleanza Stop5G*, *Ancora Italia* (a splinter party of *Vox Italia*), *Noi con Trump*, *Io Apro Milano* and *Io Apro Toscana*, *World Wide Demonstration Italia* and some local sections of R2020, the party launched by the former 5 Star Movement MP Sara Cunial. With a centralized structure, the Fronte del Dissenso presents itself as a unitary confederative movement which, in order to contribute to overcoming the fragmentation of anti-system forces, unites citizens, movements, associations, purpose committees, trade unions and parties that agree on the claim that the Constitution of 1948 must be properly implemented, re-evaluating its principles of social justice, freedom, emancipation, democracy and popular, national and monetary sovereignty (Fronte del Dissenso 2021). As one of the speakers stressed during the event in April 2021, “we need to go beyond fragmentation, the moment of spontaneity is behind us. From this assembly we hope to build a national coordination, from which we can develop a platform”. The Front claims to stimulate, organize and coordinate the various struggles of popular resistance opposing the attempts of globalist elites to build a new technocratic and neoliberal tyranny that involves the elimination of individual identity and of nations, as well as the dismantling of social rights and personal freedoms (*ibid.*). From the video analysis, a recurrent problem description can be evinced in terms of authorities not abiding by democratic rules, thus the numerous references to a dictatorship, coupled with the corrupt behavior of politicians and the media: “we defend freedom, freedom of speech, corrupt and biased media are the firearm of politicians. They lied to us in every respect. The awakening of the people is the end of the neoliberal dictatorship.” It considers Sars CoV-2 as instrumental in justifying the initiation of a “creative destruction” aimed at “creating an economic system of the impoverishment of large masses of the population through savage competition and generating permanent austerity” (*ibid.*). As it states in its manifesto (2021):

The Dissent Front declares its loyalty to the Fatherland and sets out to change the status quo, and to this end includes anyone who shares these premises, whatever their political and / or religious faith; it rejects the right-center-left classification, which has long become a weapon of the elite to keep the popular classes divided and subjugated, pushing them more and more towards alienating homologation and social subordination (Fronte del Dissenso 2021).

As shown in Figure 3, the majority of the protest events during the first wave of contention were attended by a diverse set of social groups affected by lockdown and anti-contagion measures, such as workers from the tourism and catering sectors, students protesting against school closures, as well as artists, high-school teachers, taxi drivers and nightclub owners (included in the category “Others” in Figure 3). During the second wave, most notably from the launch of the vaccination campaign in December 2020 and the introduction of the vaccination certificate in July 2021, the core of participants in the protests was initially formed by people identifying and identified as anti-vax, with a subsequent shift to those identifying as anti-Green Pass (Figure 3). As mentioned above, there were fewer protests organized by coordinated political groups or initiatives and these mainly appeared in the fall of 2021. Although there is a decrease in the presence of actors from the far right, their numbers remain quite consistent throughout the time period in question. While some protests were organized by far-right actors, most notably Forza Nuova and its Roman leader Giuliano Castellino, others were infiltrated by the same actors, often creating tensions with other protest organizers.

Figure 3. Organizers of the protest events by wave



6. The forms of action

Given the heterogeneity of the actors involved, the *repertoires of action also tended to be plural*, including conventional and unconventional, peaceful and violent, online and offline forms. Anti-vax protests initially spread in the traditional form of a vigil, as static forms of small gatherings that were the only permitted means of protest during high peaks of contagion. However, over time they developed into marches of varying size (Figure 4).

Protests sometimes emerged as *violent*, with an increase of more radical forms in time. While the protestors aimed at spreading the image of peaceful demonstrators, from the very beginning protests were confrontational, especially through their challenges to the anti-contagion measures, such as the wearing of masks and the keeping of physical distance. As the two protest waves had peaks and troughs, following the rhythms of the spread of the virus and the institutional policies introduced to control it, escalations took place in reaction to police attempts at enforcing prohibitions on demonstrating and the violation of anti-contagion rules, which had an impact on the number of participants. While there was a massive number of court cases brought by activists against the anti-contagion regulations, these tended to fail as the courts confirmed the legitimacy of measures that had been introduced. During the second wave of contention, at a time in which the vaccination campaign was underway, there was a considerable increase in radicalization, which included hate

campaigns on social media, walk-ins at the homes of politicians and medical experts as well as violence enacted against vaccination centers.

Radicalization has been present since the beginning of the pandemic in various forms of defiance of orders related with the protective policies aimed at stopping the spread of the contagion. During the anti-vax protests, the refusal to wear masks was viewed as an act of resistance and conspiracy theories spread alongside anti-Semitism and a downplaying of the Shoah. Violent escalation had already developed as early as October 2020 during the protests against a new lockdown, which saw a particularly high level of participation by owners and workers in the tourism sectors that had been most affected by the pandemic. In Naples, for example, protests started at 11 pm on 23 October against the establishment of a new nighttime curfew. There was an escalation in fights with the police outside of the headquarters of the regional government of Campania—as protestors built barricades, set garbage on fire and attacked police vans, with the police responding with teargas and water cannons (Sky, 24/10/2020). In the same period, on 30 October, skirmishes between police and protestors took place in Florence at an unauthorized protest involving a few hundred protestors, who allegedly threw stones and bottles at police in riot gear (Sky, 31/10/2020).

One of the most violent developments to occur during the second wave took place at the national march held in Piazza del Popolo in Rome on 9 October 2021, at which organizers claim ten thousand participants were present, Roman salutes were observed being made alongside an abundant use of Italian flags, with activists damaging police vans and throwing chairs while the police reacted with baton charges. These violent actions were led by leaders of the radical right-wing party Forza Nuova, Roberto Fiore and Giuliano Castellino, who mobilized a section of the protestors to take part in an assault on the headquarters of Italy's main trade union, the CGIL, calling trade unionists “traitors”, breaking into the building and damaging furniture and equipment, before trying to reach the seat of the Prime Minister (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 30/10/2021).²

Further escalations happened a few days later as a committee of dock workers in Trieste called a strike and blocked some of the entry points to the docks in protest against the introduction of the Green Pass to access the workplace. On 18 October 2021, the police used water cannons and tear gas to open access to the docks with violent clashes ensuing between police and protestors, who subsequently occupied the central Piazza dell'Unità d'Italia and carried out protests in the following days, which often turned violent. Indeed, the protests against the Green Pass in Trieste received national attention, with 15,000 activists from all over Italy travelling to the city to take part. One of the local union leaders, Stefano Puzzer, who had called for the reestablishment of privileges that the peace treaty signed following WWII had awarded to the harbor, became a national icon for the anti-vax protesters (Ansa, 18/10/2021). In response to these events, protests were banned in city centers until the end of the health emergency.

Other forms of action, such as civil disobedience, were employed by some restaurant owners operating under the slogan “Io apro” (I open), challenging lockdown measures during the first wave of contention. In other cases, protests developed in more articulated forms, calling for the reopening of cultural and educational activities. Mobilizations against the closure of cultural activities and schools mainly took nonviolent forms, including for instance the holding of lessons in the open air or students connecting to online classes from outside their schools.

During the second wave of contention, and especially in the fall of 2021, protests were called every Saturday against the introduction of the Green Pass to access several types of buildings and businesses. Usually having only received authorization for static protests, such as *presidi* (sit-ins), the events involved attempts to form marches as well as the defiance of anti-contagion measures (i.e. wearing face masks and maintaining social

² Four people were arrested during the protest: later on, other five people will receive precautionary measures (including arrests and home detention), including three football hooligans and another leader of Forza Nuova with charges of devastation and aggravated looting, violence and resistance to public officials (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 30/10/2021).

distance). In order to reduce disruption to shopping areas (something that was often stigmatized by shop owners), from late November onwards protests began to be prohibited in city centers and the police launched investigations into episodes of violence, in particular those against journalists.³ The number of protestors, which had increased in October, tended to decline as time went on, while the police started to systematically identify participants at non-authorized protests, fine those not wearing face masks, file charges against those accused of resisting police intervention, and issue so-called “*DASPO urbani*”, which banned certain people from accessing specific areas.

While a new directive from the Ministry of the Interior prohibited marches, on 14 November 2021, sit-ins were carried out in Rome, Turin and Milan (the latter of which included a protest event organized by Robert Kennedy Jr.) but also in Gorizia, Naples, Florence, Padua and Novara, among other cities. Participants attempted to reach symbolic sites—often under the slogan “*giù le mani dai bambini*” (“hands off the children”) in response to ongoing discussions on the possibility of vaccinating children over the age of five. In Rome, a child was presented before a few hundred protestors as a symbol of children under threat, while activists from Forza Nuova called for freedom for their comrades.

Since at least the summer of 2021, signs and symbols displayed at protests included swastikas, Stars of David, and striped overalls evoking those worn in concentration camps, all of which were aimed at stressing the parallel between the persecuted Jews and the non-vaccinated. From as early as 24 July 2021, the words “Vaccines set you free” written over a picture of the gates to Auschwitz appeared on posters in Rome, while in Genova protestors wore yellow Star of David badges to allude to their own “persecution” due to their unvaccinated status. There were calls for a Nurnberg process to deal with the sanitary dictatorship, while the use of the Green Pass to access various spaces was compared to the Fascist era racial laws (Huffpost, 24/07/2021). On the day devoted to the memory of the Shoah, Israeli flags were displayed marked with 1938 (the year in which the racial laws were introduced by the Fascist Regime) and 2022, or 1945 (the year of the Liberation from Fascism) and 2022. Extracts from The Diary of Anne Frank were read aloud to stress the similarities between the discrimination of the Jews and that of anti-vaxxers (Giannoli 2022).

Towards the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022, there was a rise in the use of hunger strikes on an individual level by schoolteachers who were personally at risk of suspension or were suspended as they either refused to show a Green Pass or (when vaccination became compulsory) had not been vaccinated. Individual cases reported in the media, which also extend beyond the time period of our protest event analysis, included a philosophy teacher in Treviso (Il Gazzettino 16/2/22) and a music teacher in Milan who staged a solitary sit in in front of his school (Corriere della sera 7/2/2022).⁴ In some cases hunger strikes were also organized collectively.

A further increasing trend that emerged towards the end of 2021 and the beginning of the new year was a wave of copy-cat collective action involving the submission of formal complaints filed at police stations and in tribunals against the prime minister, Mario Draghi, his health minister, Roberto Speranza, and all other ministers accused of the crime of “private violence” (art. 610 of the penal code) in relation to the requirement to display a Green Pass to access specific locations, including workplaces. These self-proclaimed “mass denunciations” were registered in several Italian cities where groups of a few dozen activists queued up in front of the police stations and tribunals to deposit their individual complaints. Denouncing “blackmail” and calling for the judges to intervene in order to stop the authoritarian turn, a document demanded that

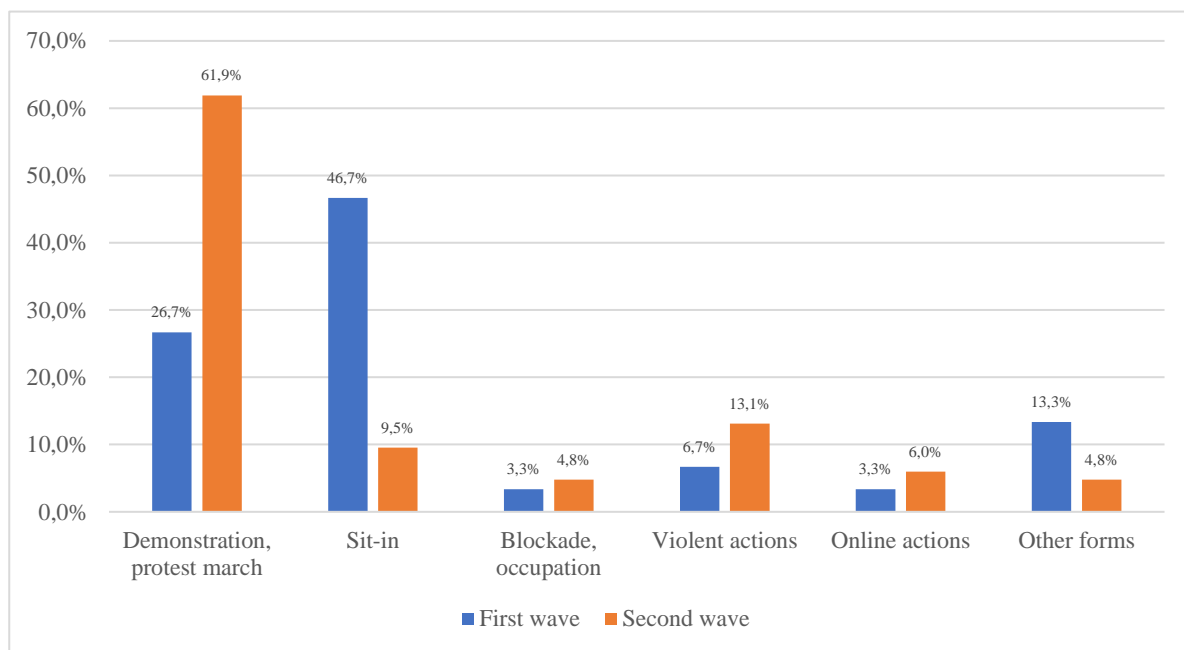
³ In Milan, between November 25th and January 9th only religious, commercial and cultural demonstrations were allowed in the city center.

⁴ In Rome, a professor of philosophy was actually declared unfit for vaccination by a medical doctor, given their deteriorating health condition following an almost two-week hunger strike carried out in front of the government headquarter at Palazzo Chigi (Il Tempo, 13/01/2022).

“those responsible for the actions outlined here, therefore the President Mario Draghi and the other Ministers of his Government, are punished for the crime referred to in Article 610 of the Criminal Code, possibly even in an aggravated form, or for those better seen and deemed to be inferred from the present narrative. [...] We also call for the most appropriate precautionary measures to be introduced in order to stop the consequences of the crime in progress, given that vaccination blackmail is in full effect, people are unfortunately forced to support themselves by vaccinating themselves against their will.” (Ansa, 17 January 2022)

Similar actions were launched by other organizations, often in competition with each other.

Figure 4. Forms of action by wave



7. Concluding remarks

Based on protest event analysis, this article aimed to describe the protests that took place in Italy against anti-contagion policies. From a theoretical point of view, the value of disentangling the different waves that are nested in a protest cycle has been demonstrated. From an empirical point of view, notwithstanding the limitations of protest event analysis, this research has made it possible to zoom out on a broader protest cycle, by distinguishing two waves, with different characteristics in terms of intensity, the actors mobilized and the forms of actions employed. On a methodological level, it has presented a novel development in protest event analysis, by supplementing the traditional quantitative data collection and analysis through a qualitative part, based on the video content analysis of protest events.

The analysis of anti-vax protests in Italy has indicated a number of trends, which would also seem to be shared in other countries. In general, it has been noticed that protests were rather localized and small-scale, especially during the first wave, with certain exceptions in the second wave especially and in some specific cities. The rhythm of the protests can be seen to have followed the rhythm of the spread of the virus and the related anti-contagion measures, with a focus on lockdowns, the wearing of face masks, the use of the vaccination certificate (Green Pass) and vaccination. However, in the first wave, claims were more negotiable and mainly oriented towards calls for public investment in certain policy areas (from tourism to schools). During the second wave, protestors more often denied the severity of Covid-19 and contested the very effects of vaccination, attacking vaccines as dangerous and denouncing plots and a supposed dictatorship. Territorially, the more heavily attended protests tended to be concentrated in a few cities, mainly in Rome and Milan, with some highly visible events also in Turin, Genoa and Trieste (the latter of which are all in the North of the country). This was especially the case in the second wave.

In general, protests were called by local *ad-hoc* committees, with little resilience in the first wave, and some more developed structures during the second wave. In the first wave, employers and employees of those sectors more heavily affected economically by the pandemic organized protests against the second lockdown and curfews measures, with some escalation in cities such as Naples and Florence. In the second wave, we saw the dominance of various components of the anti-vax movements—from the exoteric wing to anti-Europe parties, from religious fundamentalist groupings to followers of various conspiracies. Far-right activists were also present from the beginning, providing organizational support and bridging positions against anti-contagion measures with exclusive nationalism and calls for individual freedoms. During the campaigns, some coordination committees were also formed at a national level (such as Coordinamento 15 Ottobre, Basta Dittatura and Fronte del Dissenso), which engaged in increasing internal struggles.

While episodes of violence were rare, protesters generally tended to defy existing rules against contagion and also verbally attacked journalists and bystanders. Violence was more present when the far right led the marches, or part of them, as was the case with the assault of the headquarters of the main trade union, the CGIL, in Rome. Street battles also escalated in Trieste, as some non-vaccinated harbor workers occupied a number of docks and the police intervened to clear them away. This led to the ensuing unauthorized occupation of the main square in the city, which attracted antivaxers from all over Italy. Moreover, various groups distributed online toolkits to organize protests, online and offline, often operating through a crowd-sourced model (della Porta 2022a). Towards the end of the cycle of protest, there was a particular rise in attempts to use forms of action such as hunger strikes and formal complaints, which only had limited success, while calls for roadblocks or sit-ins in front of the private houses of elected politicians, experts and journalists had no response.

In summary, the protest event analysis has made it possible to single out two quite distinct waves, which differ in terms of the forms of action and actors involved. In the first one, claims for public investment were mainly negotiated by collective actors, including traditional interest organizations and *ad-hoc* grassroots groups. Indeed, the selective effects of the pandemic seem to have triggered specific grievances, which resulted in (at least partial) institutional responses. On the other hand, during the second wave, dynamics of (not solely)

symbolic radicalization were observed, with the convergence of anti-vax groups and far-right activists. While initial analysis confirms similar trends in other countries, more systematic cross-national comparisons will be needed in order to explain the impact of specific political opportunities on the emergence and the development of anti-vax protests. Finally, the present study has expanded on classical protest event analysis by relying on video content analysis. The use of video can enrich both methods and also offers the potential to bridge them in certain circumstances. Indeed, video analysis can combine breadth and depth by increasing the qualitative information available as well as by reducing the costs for observing them. The description obtained from easily available videos can make it possible to reduce the biased effects of filtered written coverage and the analysis of videos can substantially expand the information collected on a large number of events, something that is especially the case for symbols and frames (della Porta 2022b).

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