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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Mapping Waves of Climate Contention: Tactical Shifts and Spatial Inequalities in the Italian Protest Cycle

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**ABSTRACT:** This article analyses recent climate contention in Italy through an original dataset of 186 protest events collected between 2022 and 2024 using Online Protest Event Analysis (OPEA). Drawing on social movement theory and the concept of waves of contention, it examines the temporal rhythms, repertorial transformations, and spatial configurations of contemporary climate mobilization. Findings reveal a cyclical and intermittent pattern of protest, marked by alternating phases of intensification, latency, and strategic recomposition. While demonstrative practices remain dominant, the period is characterized by the temporary strategic centrality of civil disobedience, driven primarily by Ultima Generazione, which selectively reconfigures protest repertoires without producing a generalized escalation of conflict. Spatially, climate contention is concentrated in the metropolitan centres of Northern and Central Italy, while more territorially embedded forms of environmental mobilization appear rooted in distinct place-based ecologies of contention. Overall, the Italian case is interpreted as a specific wave of contention nested within a broader cycle of environmental contention, shaped by tactical innovation, internal differentiation, and shifting political opportunities.

**KEYWORDS:** Climate activism, protest repertoires, waves of contention, civil disobedience, contentious politics

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, climate mobilizations have undergone rapid expansion and gained heightened visibility in the public sphere. Nonviolent yet highly disruptive direct actions – such as road blockades, symbolic defacements, gluing-in, and lock-ons – have contributed to redefining the repertoire of civil disobedience by introducing forms of action that challenge established protest conventions. These practices have not only revitalized debates on the legitimacy of mobilization strategies but have also prompted broader reflection on the transformations of social movements in the era of global ecological crisis (Wahlström *et al.* 2013; Svensson and Wahlström 2021; Imperatore 2023).

In the attempting to interpret the rapid emergence of these forms of protest, media discourse has predominantly relied on simplified interpretive frames, drawing on analytical schemes typically used to describe vandalism, sect-like dynamics, or, more generally, deviant behaviors attributed to individual states of fear and perceived insecurity.

In contrast to such reductive interpretations, social sciences – and particularly scholarship on social movements and contentious politics – offer a more complex and theoretically grounded analysis of the dynamics that sustain the protest practices of climate activists (Wahlström *et al.* 2013; Svensson and Wahlström 2021; Cugnata *et al.* 2024; Zamponi *et al.* 2024). This body of research considers not only structural factors (political opportunities, social networks) but also cultural processes (cognitive liberation, framing, narratives, identities, emotions) through which individuals initially in a condition of quiescence choose to mobilize and engage in contentious and disobedient forms of collective action (Kenis 2019; de Moor and Wahlström 2019; Jasny and Fisher 2023; Zamponi *et al.* 2022; Poma and Gravante 2024; Giannini 2024).

In this article, with the aim of deepening our understanding of the dynamics and mechanisms characterizing climate protests, we adopt an analytical perspective that weaves together insights from social movement theory and contentious politics. From a theoretical standpoint, in line with previous studies, we highlight the relevance of distinguishing among the different waves of mobilization that unfold within broader protest cycles (della Porta and Lavizzari 2022). Empirically, focusing on the Italian case, we propose an approach that integrates protest event analysis, collective action performances, the actors involved, and the geographical distribution of mobilizations recorded between 2022 and 2024.

We begin by reviewing existing literature on climate protest, followed by a definition of the conceptual framework, with particular attention to the notion of waves of contention. We then present a methodological note aimed at clarifying our main analytical choices and the empirical patterns observed in terms of timing, intensity, and geographical spread of mobilization. The empirical analysis is structured along four main dimensions: the temporal evolution of mobilizations; the tactical and strategic differences among actors; the development and/or transformation of the repertoires of action; and the geographical distribution of protest. Particular attention is devoted to the significant heterogeneity characterizing the identified protest waves, highlighting elements of continuity and discontinuity, as well as mechanisms of imitation, learning, and reciprocal adaptation that shaped their evolution. In this perspective, the article seeks to expand and update the interpretive framework proposed by existing scholarship (Zamponi *et al.* 2024), integrating previous analyses of the 2019-2023 period with a specific focus on the dynamics that emerged in the subsequent triennium and on the geography of climate contention in Italy.

Finally, at the operational level, the analysis focuses on three major climate movements: *Ultima Generazione* (UG), *Extinction Rebellion* (XR), and *Fridays for Future* (FFF). This methodological choice is grounded in two analytical considerations. First, in recent years these three actors have most prominently occupied public space and media attention in the debate on climate change, making them central to reconstructing the evolution of mobilization dynamics in the Italian context. Second, they embody three

distinct – yet partially convergent – ways of conceiving and practicing collective action within the field of climate activism, thereby enabling a comparison of tactics, repertoires, temporalities, and geographies of protest within a comparable and theoretically meaningful empirical framework.

## 2. The usefulness of the concept of wave of contention for analysing eco-climate conflict

Over the past two decades, climate justice mobilizations have consolidated as one of the most salient and transnationally diffused arenas of contemporary collective action, marked by a particularly strong capacity to mobilize younger generations and to reshape patterns of political participation (Bertuzzi 2019; de Moor *et al.* 2020; Imperatore and Leonardi 2023). The growing public recognition of ecological breakdown – coupled with the perceived inadequacy of institutional responses and the limited effectiveness of international climate governance – has fostered the emergence of increasingly visible and contentious forms of mobilization, capable of redefining protest repertoires, reframing collective claims, and expanding the range of political and economic targets of contention (Wahlström *et al.* 2013; della Porta and Parks 2014; Cugnata *et al.* 2024). Situated at the intersection of environmental struggle, democratic contestation, and systemic critique, these mobilizations articulate a broader conflict over the socio-ecological organization of contemporary capitalism, projecting climate politics beyond the boundaries of issue-specific advocacy and into the terrain of structural transformation (Fraser 2022; Stein *et al.* 2019).

The analysis of climate protests has gradually expanded through a wide array of theoretical and empirical contributions, which have highlighted their evolution along several dimensions. These include the transition toward networked and horizontal organizational models that prioritize flexible, non-hierarchical structures (Diani 1988; della Porta and Diani 2004; Buzogány and Scherhauser 2022); the growing adoption of civil disobedience inspired by historical traditions such as the U.S. civil rights movement (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Engler and Engler 2017; Berglund 2025); and the identification of new symbolic and material spaces for collective action, as well as the strategic redefinition of institutional and media targets (Kinyon *et al.* 2023; Zamponi *et al.* 2022; Galiano 2025). Particularly significant has been the radical transformation of the repertoire of collective action: alongside conventional practices of demonstration and lobbying, highly visible disruptive actions have gained prominence, aimed at generating moral dilemmas for institutions and forcing the public agenda (Andretta and Imperatore 2023; Kinyon *et al.* 2023; Zamponi *et al.* 2024). Road blockades, symbolic defacements, and disruptions of cultural or sporting events – such as those promoted by the *A22 network* – function as communicative strategies designed to polarize public opinion and break the invisibility of the climate crisis, or to defamiliarize ordinary perceptions of risk by rendering it tangible, immediate, and disturbing.

Despite the empirical relevance of these transformations, the issue of changing repertoires of action has rarely been the focus of systematic analysis. The literature has tended to privilege the study of the political outcomes of mobilizations (Giugni *et al.* 1999; Bosi *et al.* 2016) and the role of movements in fostering or discouraging subsequent protest cycles (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; McAdam and Su 2002; McAdam 1995). As Zamponi *et al.* (2024) note, even the most recent approaches – those adopting relational and process-oriented perspectives to analyse interactions between movements and institutions (Kriesi *et al.* 2019) – tend to concentrate primarily on dynamics triggered by governmental proposals, overlooking the impact that the absence of institutional responses exerts on movement tactical choices. From this standpoint, the effect of frustrated claims – and the consequent processes of radicalization of collective action – remains an underexplored dimension. The contributions of Bojar and colleagues (2021) and, more recently, Zamponi *et*

*al.* (2024) and de Nardis and Galiano (2024) move precisely in this direction, and this study seeks to build on and extend that line of inquiry. To do so, we adopt the concept of wave of contention, first developed by Beissinger (2002) and Koopmans (2004), and subsequently re-elaborated and applied by della Porta and Lavizzari (2022) in the analysis of pandemic protests.

Situated within the broader theoretical framework of protest cycles (Tarrow 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Tilly and Tarrow 2007; della Porta 2014), the concept of wave of contention allows for the temporal disaggregation of the mobilization cycle into distinct and analytically bounded phases, characterized by a relative coherence in terms of actors involved, articulated claims, and performative modalities. These waves represent internal articulations within broader cycles, often triggered by critical junctures in political, institutional, or environmental arenas (Beissinger 2002), and develop through processes of learning, imitation, and innovation that foster the circulation of practices, symbols, and meanings within the protest field (Koopmans 1993, 2004).

Employing this interpretive category is particularly useful for addressing the central question guiding this study: in what ways can the absence of institutional responses shape the transformation of movement repertoires? By segmenting the protest cycle into distinct waves, it becomes possible to observe with greater precision the tactical variations adopted by movements, as well as the processes of radicalization, continuity, or innovation that characterize each phase. Notably, the ascending phases of these waves tend to generate demonstration effects that lower the costs of engaging in collective action, encouraging emulation by new actors and, in some cases, fostering an escalation of contentious practices and the emergence of spin-off movements (McAdam 1995).

### 3. Genealogical notes on the eco-climate movement

The contemporary climate movement, in continuity with historical environmentalism, is best understood as a heterogeneous and internally differentiated field of contention composed of structured organizations, informal collectives, transnational advocacy networks, and individual activists mobilized around the causes and consequences of global warming, particularly those associated with greenhouse gas emissions (Nulman 2022; Grasso and Giugni 2022; Pellizzoni *et al.* 2022). Within this broad constellation, diverse diagnostic and prognostic visions coexist, often reflecting different political cultures, scales of intervention, and strategic orientations. Yet, despite these internal differences, a shared horizon of contention persists, centred on the need to exert pressure on governments, corporations, and supranational institutions in order to promote structural transformations in the socio-economic arrangements underpinning ecological breakdown.

The emergence of climate contention as a relatively autonomous field of mobilization unfolded gradually and was profoundly shaped by the temporal disjuncture between the consolidation of scientific consensus on climate change and its delayed reception within public discourse and institutional politics. As Nulman (2022) observes, traditional environmental activism – followed by environmental justice movements – played a formative role in introducing climate concerns into political agendas, even when their initial influence remained relatively circumscribed. Through the progressive sedimentation of these experiences, a shared cognitive praxis gradually took shape: a repertoire of interpretive frames, analytical categories, and discursive resources through which both social and institutional actors came to understand, politicize, and strategically frame climate change as a matter of collective conflict.

This cognitive and organizational sedimentation developed in parallel with the early cycle of the *Conferences of the Parties* (COP), a period during which significant internal tensions became increasingly visible (Aykut *et al.* 2017). These tensions concerned the unequal distribution of responsibility for emissions between the Global North and the Global South, competing visions regarding the most effective repertoires of

action, and disagreements over the political lexicon best suited to articulating climate grievances in publicly resonant ways (Cassegård and Thörn 2017). From this phase onward, climate contention assumed the irregular and non-linear rhythm that de Moor and colleagues (2020) describe as “intermittent”, characterized by alternating periods of intense public mobilization and phases of latency devoted to strategic reflection, the production of counter-knowledge, activist education, and tactical innovation.

From this broader field emerged a succession of particularly visible waves of contention – not as discrete stages in a linear movement trajectory, but as temporally bounded configurations that periodically redefined the strategic, symbolic, and organizational centre of climate mobilization. Each wave was characterized by specific combinations of actors, frames, organizational forms, and repertoires of action, while coexisting with a wider ecology of environmental struggles that continued to develop across local, national, and transnational arenas.

A first prototypical wave emerged between 2006 and 2009 around campaigns that explicitly linked ecological degradation to the structural contradictions of fossil capitalism and the ideology of limitless growth. Activist networks such as *Plane Stupid* in the United Kingdom promoted forms of nonviolent direct action – including symbolic runway occupations and temporary airport blockades – aimed at exposing the environmental costs of aviation and obstructing airport expansion. Although numerically limited, this phase displayed several features of a wave of contention: transnational circulation of climate justice frames, experimentation with innovative repertoires of direct action, and an emerging connection between territorially situated struggles and global climate governance. This configuration culminated in the large-scale mobilizations surrounding the *COP15* in Copenhagen, one of the earliest mass expressions of public disillusionment with multilateral climate negotiations, increasingly perceived as incapable of producing effective responses to ecological crisis (Wahlström *et al.* 2013; Schlosberg and Collins 2014; de Moor 2018).

A second wave took shape in the early 2010s within a broader transnational anti-extractivist cycle, whose most visible epicentre was the United States. Mobilizations against the *Keystone XL pipeline* became emblematic of a broader challenge to the structural carbon lock-in of advanced capitalist economies (Tramel 2016). At the same time, organizations such as *350.org*, climate camps in Europe, and anti-extractivist struggles across Latin America contributed to expanding the field geographically and politically (Saunders and Price 2009; McGregor 2015; Svampa 2019). During this phase, protest repertoires widened considerably, combining conventional demonstrations with performative action, coalition-building, Indigenous resistance, and broader alliances linking environmental actors, labour movements, and civil society organizations. This wave culminated symbolically in the *People's Climate March* in New York City, which mobilized over 400,000 participants and represented one of the clearest manifestations of climate contention as a large-scale public issue.

A third and geographically unprecedented wave crystallized around the catalytic visibility generated by Greta Thunberg's school strike in 2018 and the rapid transnational diffusion of *FFF*. Recent scholarship has conceptualized this phase through the notion of a “Greta effect,” highlighting a sharp increase in public attention, media salience, and youth engagement around climate change (Sabherwal *et al.* 2021; Haugseth and Smeplass 2023; Salerno 2023; Mede and Schroder 2024). Yet rather than reducing this wave to charismatic leadership, these studies emphasize its relational and mediated character, shaped by broader communicative environments and pre-existing structures of mobilization. In this sense, the emergence of *FFF* is more accurately understood as a moment of acceleration within a longer cycle of contention, during which legitimacy, participation, and public visibility were profoundly reconfigured across multiple arenas. The adoption of the climate strike as a collective form of action, coupled with a frame centred on urgency, intergenerational justice, and political inaction, generated an unprecedented global wave of youth-led mobilization spanning more than 150 countries. This phase contributed to the increasing recognition of

younger generations as political actors and to a partial shift in the discursive construction of the climate crisis in the public sphere. The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic abruptly interrupted this expansionary trajectory, restricting access to public space and temporarily destabilizing movement visibility, coordination, and collective momentum.

The fourth and most recent wave emerged in the post-pandemic period, with one of its most visible radical poles coalescing around the transnational *A22 network*, formally established in 2022. Conceived with the explicit aim of revitalizing nonviolent direct action through high-impact forms of civil disobedience, *A22* has developed a contentious model of mobilization centred on polarizing communicative strategies, tactical disruption, and the deliberate production of public dilemmas. Organizations operating within this network – including *Just Stop Oil* in the United Kingdom, *Dernière Rénovation* in France, *Letzte Generation* in Germany, and *Ultima Generazione* in Italy – are characterized by relatively lean organizational architectures, transnational coordination, and a strategic orientation grounded in nonviolent radicalism. Their repertoire combines road blockades, symbolic interventions targeting artworks and cultural heritage, and disruptive incursions into major cultural and sporting events, all designed to interrupt the routinization of ecological collapse and force political, institutional, and public audiences into morally and strategically charged dilemmas (Sørensen and Martin 2014; Galiano 2025).

More broadly, this wave marks a significant reconfiguration of climate contention, shaped by the increasing centrality of civil disobedience, the deliberate politicization of disruption, and the articulation of a collective identity organized around climate emergency as a permanent condition of exception conferring moral urgency upon direct action. What unites these organizations extends beyond tactical affinity: they share an interpretive frame that constructs climate breakdown as an existential threat requiring immediate intervention, thereby recasting civil disobedience as both politically necessary and ethically justified (Dietz 2014; Doherty *et al.* 2020; Buzogány and Scherhauser 2022; Giannini 2024). At the same time, scholarship has drawn attention to the ambivalent political effects of radical protest. While highly disruptive actions often generate immediate controversy and strong oppositional reactions, they may also expand the discursive and strategic space available to more moderate actors, enhancing their perceived legitimacy through contrast mechanisms commonly described as radical flank effects (Chenoweth and Schock 2015; McCammon *et al.* 2015; Ellefsen 2018; Simpson *et al.* 2022).

Within this broader contentious arena operate also more antagonistic ecological actors – such as *Ende Gelände* in Germany, *Code Rood* in the Netherlands, and *Les Soulèvements de la Terre* in France – whose repertoires are marked by highly confrontational and materially disruptive forms of action, at times involving sabotage and targeted damage to fossil infrastructures. Their interventions include organized occupations of strategic sites such as mines, pipelines, extraction plants, and logistical hubs, aimed at temporarily interrupting extractivist production systems while publicly denouncing their ecological unsustainability and moral illegitimacy (Malm 2021). As Berglund (2025) observes, these actors operate in a liminal zone between civil disobedience and anarchist-antagonist direct action, deliberately departing from the symbolic codes of traditional environmentalism in favour of direct confrontation (Franks 2003; Graeber 2009; Scheuerman 2022). Their strategic orientation seeks simultaneously to impose material, political, and reputational costs on those deemed responsible for ecological breakdown and to cultivate prefigurative practices oriented toward alternative socio-political forms of organization (Maeckelbergh 2011; Gelderloos 2013; Yates 2015; Malm 2021).

Taken together, recent scholarship portrays climate contention as a heterogeneous, evolving, and internally contested field of mobilization, shaped by strategic experimentation, discursive realignment, organizational innovation, and ongoing transformations in repertoires of action. From this perspective, the wave of contention framework offers a particularly fruitful analytical lens for grasping the temporal sequencing, relational

dynamics, and shifting configurations of meaning that structure climate mobilization over time. It is precisely within this analytical horizon that the Italian case examined here can be situated, as a specific configuration of climate contention shaped by broader transnational dynamics while also rooted in nationally and territorially situated forms of conflict, organization, and political articulation.

#### 4. Data and methods

This study adopts a quantitative research design based on the construction of an original dataset of climate-related protest events that occurred in Italy between January 2022 and December 2024. The methodological framework is situated within the tradition of *Protest Event Analysis* (PEA), suitably adapted to the characteristics of the digital media sphere through *Online Protest Event Analysis* (OPEA) (Hutter 2014; Andretta and Pavan 2020; della Porta and Lavizzari 2022). To this end, event retrieval was structured through a systematic data-collection procedure based on the *Google News* search engine, conceived as a discovery infrastructure for identifying relevant protest occurrences across the national media landscape and organized according to a multi-level search strategy inspired by Andretta and Pavan (2020), with the aim of ensuring exhaustiveness and traceability.

Data collection was carried out in anonymous browsing mode to reduce potential distortions generated by personalized profiling algorithms and to ensure greater neutrality in source retrieval. Boolean search strings were iteratively refined through exploratory testing in order to capture lexical variation in media reporting and maximize retrieval exhaustiveness. The search strategy combined the names of the collective actors under examination – including acronyms and alternative labels where relevant – with a broader set of protest-related descriptors calibrated to the semantic field of climate contention in the Italian context. Searches were conducted within defined temporal windows and progressively adjusted throughout the data-collection process in response to emergent terminological variations in media coverage. This iterative approach was designed to balance semantic precision with broad retrieval capacity, reducing the risk of systematically excluding relevant protest occurrences. For the sake of transparency and replicability, a typical search query took the following form: (“Fridays for Future” OR “FFF” OR “Extinction Rebellion” OR “XR” OR “Ultima Generazione”) AND (protesta OR manifestazione OR blocco OR sit-in OR sciopero climatico OR azione diretta) AND Italia.

Each retrieved item was then manually screened to verify its relevance, ensuring that the reported event met the definitional criteria adopted in this study (collective action, public visibility, and a clear spatial-temporal reference). Once identified, the event was either included or excluded based on these criteria and subsequently coded according to the variables specified in the codebook. To further clarify the procedure, consider the following example. Using the query (“Ultima Generazione” AND protesta AND Italia), a news article reporting a road blockade in Rome in March 2023 was retrieved. The article was selected because it explicitly mentioned the actor (Ultima Generazione), the location (Rome), and the form of action (road blockade). The event was then coded as a single protest occurrence, with the following attributes: date (1.03.2023), place 1 (Lazio), place 2 (Rome), performance (road blockade), initiating actor (Ultima Generazione), and target (public authorities). This procedure was consistently applied across the dataset to ensure comparability and replicability.

Only articles in which at least one of the collective actors under examination was explicitly mentioned in the title, subtitle, or opening paragraph were included, in order to ensure a high degree of semantic relevance in the empirical material collected and reduce ambiguity in actor attribution. This criterion, while strengthening analytical consistency, also privileges forms of protest in which collective actors are clearly foregrounded in

media narratives, potentially underrepresenting less visible, weakly branded, or more territorially embedded forms of climate-related mobilization.

The selection of the three collective actors examined in this study – *FFF*, *XR*, and *UG* – follows theoretical and methodological criteria well established in the literature on climate activism and *PEA*. Rather than aiming to capture the entire heterogeneous field of environmental contention, this study focuses on the most visible and nationally salient climate-oriented protest organizations operating in Italy during the period under examination. This delimitation reflects both substantive and methodological considerations: substantively, these actors represent the most prominent organizational configurations structuring recent climate contention; methodologically, their sustained public visibility and recurrent media presence make them particularly suitable for systematic event-based analysis within a *PEA/OPEA* framework.

First, these actors represent the three main organizational configurations that, in both the European and Italian contexts, have shaped the climate mobilization cycle of the past decade. Recent comparative studies show that *FFF* and *XR* constitute the most significant transnational infrastructures of contemporary climate activism, whereas *UG*, as part of the international *A22 network*, embodies the most recent configuration of high-visibility nonviolent direct action (de Moor *et al.* 2020; della Porta 2020; Grasso and Giugni 2022). This choice therefore makes it possible to include, within the research design, three distinct repertorial families – mass mobilization, performative disruptive action, and high-visibility civil disobedience – whose comparison is widely recognized in the literature as crucial for understanding transformations in protest repertoires (Tilly and Tarrow 2007; Tilly 2008).

Second, numerous studies on the media mediation of conflict highlight that these three actors occupied, during the period 2022–2024, a particularly significant share of public visibility and journalistic attention in relation to climate contention (Koopmans and Rucht 2002; Hutter 2014; Vliegenthart *et al.* 2016). Given that *PEA* – and even more so its online variant (*OPEA*) – relies on news sources, selecting actors that significantly structure the media agenda appears methodologically coherent for ensuring comparability and analytical consistency in data collection.

Finally, the joint inclusion of *FFF*, *XR*, and *UG* allows for the reconstruction of the different phases that have shaped the recent evolution of climate contention in Italy. *FFF* defined the expansion phase of 2018–2020; *XR* introduced more markedly disruptive forms of action in the subsequent biennium; while *UG*, from 2022 onwards, inaugurated lightweight yet highly visible tactics that have marked a new configuration of climate mobilization (Grasso and Giugni 2022). Taken together, these three cases allow for a dynamic analysis capable of capturing continuities, innovations, and internal shifts within the most visible segment of contemporary climate contention.

Event coding was restricted to reports published in three selected national newspapers – *il Fatto Quotidiano*, *la Repubblica*, and *Il Giornale* – selected on the basis of their wide circulation and their differing editorial sensibilities toward climate issues, ranging from broadly sympathetic to comparatively more critical, with heterogeneous positioning in between. This selection allowed us to incorporate contrasting media framings of climate protest, thereby strengthening the comparative robustness of the information corpus. Additional sources, particularly national news agencies such as *ANSA* and *AGI*, were consulted only to verify or complete missing information for specific variables, without altering the one-event-one-entry structure of the dataset. Local and regional sources were excluded due to their uneven coverage and newsworthiness criteria strongly conditioned by territorial proximity, which would have undermined data uniformity and comparability.

In cases where multiple outlets covered the same event, a single version was selected in order to avoid duplication and ensure consistency in coding. The criterion of selection was based on the level of informational completeness with respect to the variables included in the analytical grid (e.g., identification of actors, location, form of action, and targets). While acknowledging that different articles may provide complementary types of

information – for instance, one offering more detailed tactical descriptions and another more precise identification of actors or claims – priority was given to the source that maximized the overall codability of the event across variables. This choice inevitably entails a trade-off, as it may privilege certain dimensions of protest over others; however, it was deemed necessary to maintain dataset uniformity and avoid inconsistencies deriving from the aggregation of heterogeneous sources. Conversely, for protest events (such as climate strikes) occurring simultaneously in different locations but documented in a single synthetic or summary article, we followed the criterion proposed by other scholars (Fillieule and Jiménez 2003; Hutter 2014; Oliver *et al.* 2023; Zamponi *et al.* 2024) and disaggregated and coded each episode as an autonomous event, given its specific spatial-temporal configuration and its potentially distinct action forms and local contexts.

The analytical unit is the individual protest event, understood as a collective action defined by a precise spatial and temporal location, even when embedded in broader campaigns or coordinated across multiple cities. A total of 186 protest events were identified. Each was coded using a standardized codebook (see Table 1 in the Appendix), which includes the following variables: date and location of the action, form of protest performance (e.g., march, road blockade, symbolic defacement), target of the intervention, initiating actor, and media source. The coding protocol followed criteria of internal consistency and replicability, in line with quantitative research standards in socio-political analysis, and was based – albeit with appropriate adaptations – on the codebook developed by Kriesi and colleagues (1995), widely employed in the *PEA* tradition.

Throughout dataset construction, the coding procedure involved iterative rounds of consistency checking aimed at identifying inaccuracies, resolving ambiguities, and correcting occasional inconsistencies in variable attribution. This process of systematic verification strengthened the internal coherence of the dataset and enhanced the overall robustness of the analytical framework. Although no formal intercoder reliability procedure was implemented, particular care was devoted to maintaining coding consistency throughout the research process.

The resulting data were subsequently aggregated and analysed to reconstruct mobilization trajectories, identify recurring features in repertoires of action, and trace the spatial and temporal evolution of climate contention over the three-year period.

## 5. Waves in time and space

Before analysing the different waves that have shaped the recent cycle of climate protest in Italy, it is necessary to briefly recall some of the transformations in the political-institutional context within which these mobilizations have developed.

The climate movement examined here currently operates within a political-institutional environment increasingly shaped by securitarian logics, a growing juridification of conflict, and the extension of punitive measures targeting forms of nonconventional protest. In this context, the approval of Law No. 80/2025 – known as the *Decreto Sicurezza* – by the current government may be situated within a broader trajectory of legal regulation of dissent, reflecting a progressive tightening of the normative and political environment in which contentious action unfolds. More specifically, the introduction of criminal sanctions for nonviolent protest practices – including road blockades and certain forms of symbolic damage to public buildings – appears to indicate a contraction of the legal-political opportunity structure available to contentious actors, while potentially reshaping the perceived costs, risks, and strategic calculations associated with participation in collective action.

That said, attributing the recent contraction of climate mobilization to a direct relationship with this tightening legal framework would be analytically reductive. While scholarship has shown that legal repression,

media stigmatization, and processes of public delegitimation may affect perceptions of efficacy, the perceived costs of participation, and the strategic choices of collective actors (Earl 2003, 2011; Ferree 2005; Ellefsen 2016; Ellefsen and Jämte 2023; Di Ronco 2025), the specific weight of these dynamics in the case examined here remains difficult to isolate and calls for interpretive caution. Rather than serving as a central explanatory key, the notion of a chilling effect is better understood as one among several interacting factors that contribute to shaping the environment within which mobilization unfolds.

From a broader perspective, the decline observed in recent years appears more plausibly linked to the very nature of climate contention as an intermittent field of mobilization. As de Moor and colleagues (2020) suggest, climate movements tend to alternate between phases of heightened contention and strong public visibility, and periods of latency, internal reorganization, and strategic recalibration. This intermittence may be traced to a plurality of factors: the high organizational costs required to sustain high-intensity campaigns; dependence on windows of media attention that are structurally unstable; the difficulty of maintaining elevated levels of mobilization over time in the absence of institutional responses perceived as meaningful; the emotional and organizational wear inherent in sustained activism; competition with other public issues for collective attention; and internal tensions within the environmental field over competing visions of ecological transition, repertoires of action, and scales of conflict.

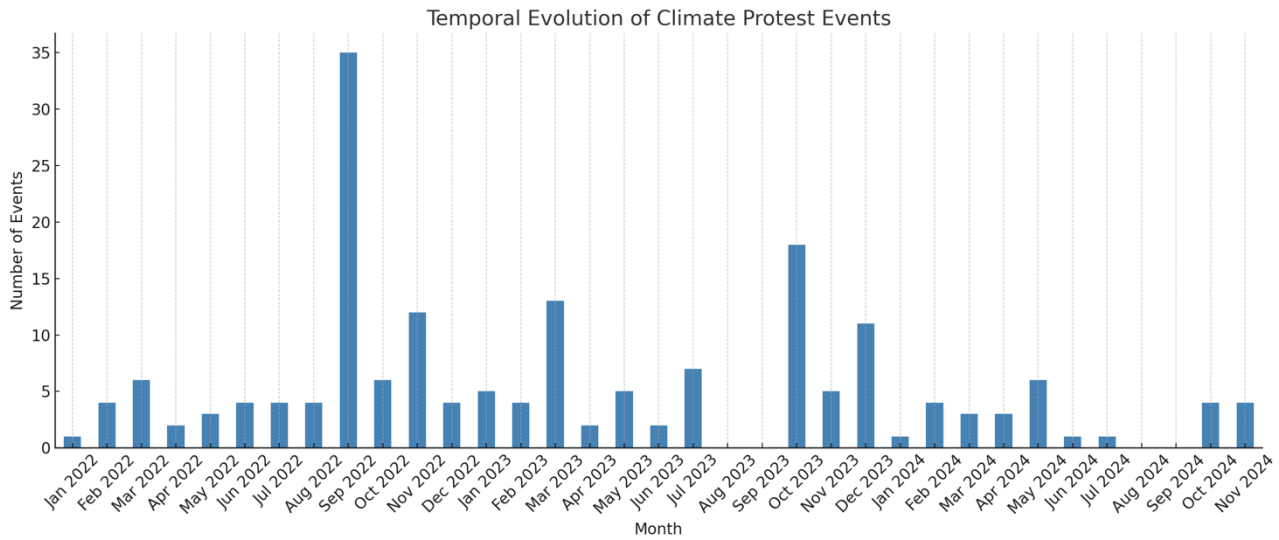
To this should be added the growing internal fragmentation of the environmental field itself. Critiques of both climate reductionism and emergency framing advanced by some sectors of the movement intersect with territorially embedded conflicts – for instance around large-scale energy infrastructures, projects associated with the ecological transition, or transformations in land use – where divergent normative priorities, distinct political ecologies, and non-convergent repertoires of action come into play (Hulme 2023; Svensson and Wahlström 2023). In this sense, the environmental field increasingly appears as a plural and internally differentiated arena, traversed by tensions, competition, and processes of strategic realignment that shape the forms, rhythms, and intensities of collective mobilization.

From this perspective, what has been observed between 2022 and 2024 is more fruitfully interpreted not as a simple process of demobilization, but as a phase of recomposition within a specific wave of contention: a phase marked by selective tactical innovation, moments of circumscribed radicalization, periods of mobilizational abeyance, and subsequent processes of organizational adaptation in response to a changing political, discursive, and relational environment. The empirical question, then, concerns which organizational, cultural, relational, and political–institutional mechanisms produce the intermittence of climate mobilization, and how these dynamics reconfigure, over time, the rhythms, repertoires, and strategic horizons of collective action.

### **5.1 Temporal dynamics**

A preliminary analysis of the monthly distribution of protest events reveals a distinctly cyclical pattern, marked by alternating phases of intensification and periods of relative stabilization in the mobilizational capacity of the actors involved in the climate protest cycle (Figure 1). The peak recorded in September 2022, characterized by a high concentration of collective actions, may appear as an anomaly relative to the overall trend. However, this configuration is consistent with the findings of Zamponi *et al.* (2024), who identify a similar dynamic between March and September 2019. This suggests the presence of a ritualized component in the temporality of climate protest, with a particularly pronounced recurrence in the months of March and September, corresponding to the climate strikes promoted by *FFF*.

**Figure 1 – Temporal evolution of climate protest event**



**Source:** author’s own elaboration

The recurrence of these peaks at regular moments in the mobilization calendar indicates that climate protest displays, at least in part, a form of seasonality. This seasonality reflects, on the one hand, *FFF*’s capacity to maintain a recognizable temporal rhythm in its global campaigns; on the other hand, it also highlights the limits of a mobilization that struggles to emancipate itself from predefined, periodic appointments. As a result, the cyclical pattern does not depend solely on endogenous movement dynamics but is also influenced by exogenous factors such as the school and university calendar (with protest intensifying in spring and autumn), weather conditions more conducive to street mobilization, and the rhythm of political and institutional agendas, which typically slows down during the summer months.

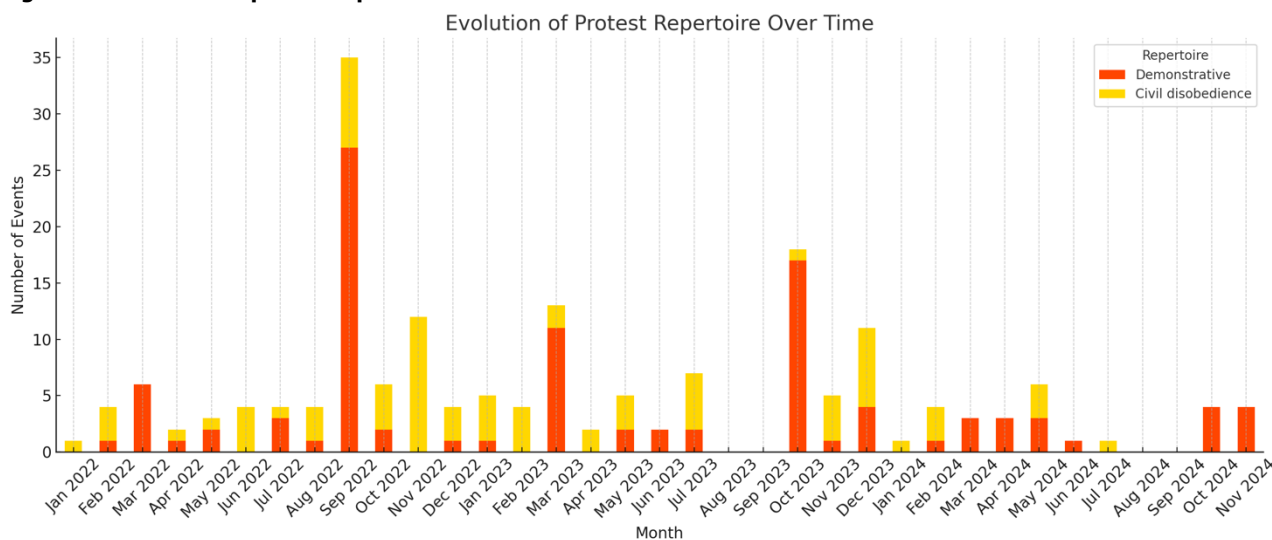
The features of the subsequent phase of the cycle warrant closer examination. Immediately after the intense mobilization observed in September 2022, what can be identified as a first wave of protest takes shape, gradually dissipating by March 2023, when mobilization returns to more ritualized forms aligned with the established climate protest calendar. This transition illustrates how protest waves build upon a baseline of recurring activity, combining extraordinary moments of escalation with more ordinary phases of collective action.

In the following period, between June and July 2023, mobilization stabilizes at intermediate levels before showing a complete interruption in August and September, months in which no protest events are recorded. This pause suggests the existence of a genuine “seasonal suspension” of climate protest, which may be interpreted either as an organizational limitation or as a strategic choice shaped by the challenges of sustaining mobilization during the summer. At the same time, it is important to consider that certain forms of protest – particularly strikes involving students, which have been central to the mobilization patterns of actors such as *FFF* – are structurally less viable during the summer months, when schools and universities are closed, thus further contributing to the observed decline in protest activity. The revival beginning in October marks the onset of a second wave of mobilization, characterized by greater heterogeneity in repertoires of action and significant intensity – though not reaching the peak observed in September 2022. This configuration appears to confirm the movement’s capacity to regenerate collective initiative after phases of latency, consistent with dynamics described in protest cycle theory (Tilly and Tarrow 2007).

## 5.2 Evolution of repertoires of action

Regarding the evolution of the repertoire of action, the data indicate a predominance of demonstrative practices over civil disobedience, although with some significant temporal variations (Figure 2).

**Figure 2 – Evolution of protest repertoire over time**



**Source:** author's own elaboration

Although demonstrative practices continue to represent the dominant component of the repertoire – largely due to the substantial incidence of climate strikes promoted by *FFF* – the autumn of 2022 marks the beginning of a visible increase in civil disobedience. These practices are mainly associated with *UG*, an actor positioned in the more challenger-oriented and radical segment of the movement, characterized by a strong propensity for tactical experimentation and innovation. In particular, *UG* introduced into the Italian context action modalities inspired by transnational repertoires (Kinyon *et al.* 2023), such as gluing-in and lock-ons, while also expanding the spectrum of protest targets through symbolic actions in museums, galleries, monuments, and historic buildings of national significance. This development can be interpreted as reflecting processes of emulation, learning, and tactical adaptation, often observed in phases of heightened contention (Tilly 1978; Tilly and Tarrow 2007).

As the figure shows, this strategic orientation becomes more visible during the central phase of the cycle, before declining sharply from summer 2024 onward and nearly disappearing in the autumn and winter months. Rather than indicating a process of escalation – understood in the literature on contentious politics as an intensification of conflictual interactions and an increase in the overall volume of protest – the observed pattern appears more consistent with a phase-specific radicalization of protest practices. In this sense, the transformation concerns primarily the qualitative dimension of the repertoire, that is, the adoption of more disruptive forms of action and a redefinition of the relationship between actors and their targets, rather than an expansion of protest activity as such.

At the same time, this phase of radicalization remains temporally bounded and is followed by a marked contraction, both in the overall number of protest events and in the presence of civil disobedience. This suggests a discontinuous and non-linear dynamic, in which moments of tactical radicalization emerge within the broader cycle of contention but do not translate into a cumulative trajectory of intensification.

In parallel, the reduction in the overall number of events may be read as indicating a temporary shift from a “logic of numbers” (DeNardo 2014), typical of more moderate components such as *FFF*, toward an intermediate configuration between the logics of “damage” and “bearing witness,” more commonly associated with highly committed and ideologically engaged actors. In such a configuration, the effectiveness of collective action tends to be evaluated less in terms of participation size and more in terms of the capacity of specific events to generate symbolic disruption and political pressure through targeted interventions. Although in this case actions remain within the boundaries of nonviolence, this orientation approaches repertoires that, in other contexts, may also include forms of material – not only symbolic – damage.

This pattern is broadly consistent with recent analyses of the environmental protest cycle in Italy (Andretta and Imperatore 2023), which point to a diversification and partial radicalization of protest repertoires, while remaining within the bounds of nonviolent action. At the same time, the emergence and subsequent decline of civil disobedience practices suggest that such developments should be interpreted as contingent and phase-specific rather than as indicators of a generalized or linear process of radicalization. Moreover, the rise of more disruptive practices may be understood as one among several possible responses to a combination of factors, including limited institutional responsiveness and changing political and discursive conditions, rather than as the outcome of a single causal mechanism.

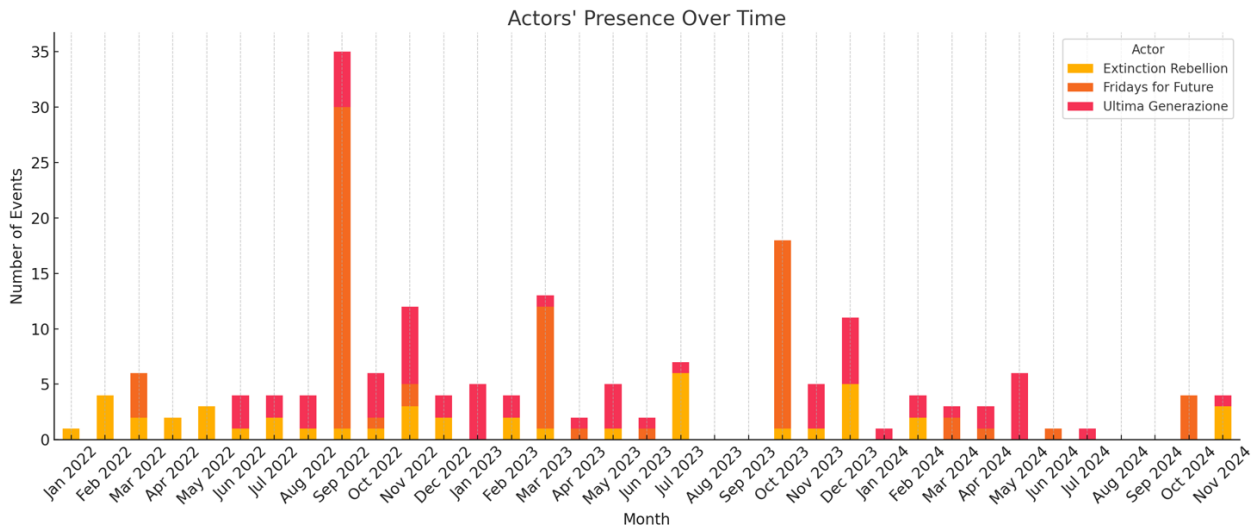
Comparison with previous studies (Andretta and Imperatore 2023; Zamponi *et al.* 2024) points to a longer-term trajectory within Italian environmentalism, characterized by a gradual shift in the relative weight of different repertoires – from predominantly institutionalized forms, typical of the 1990s and 2000s, toward more confrontational practices centred on civil disobedience and the pursuit of public visibility. Rather than suggesting a transformation of the environmental movement into a climate movement, this pattern can be more cautiously read as indicating the increasing prominence of climate-oriented actors within a broader and internally differentiated environmental field.

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Within this broader field, organizations and networks primarily focused on climate change coexist – and at times may come into tension – with other environmental actors, including associations and local committees that place greater emphasis on issues such as biodiversity, landscape protection, and land use, and that may articulate explicit critiques of “climate reductionism” or emergency-oriented framings. From this perspective, the observed evolution in protest repertoires is better understood not as a linear substitution, but as a reconfiguration of priorities, actors, and internal tensions within environmentalism itself.

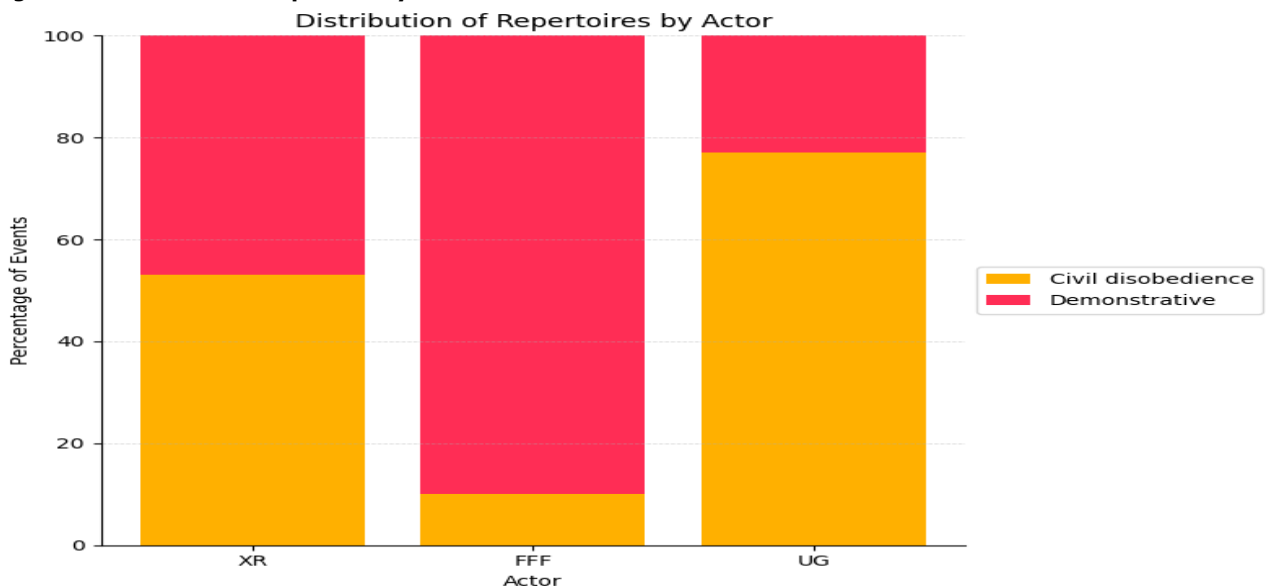
In the initial phases, *FFF* and *XR* appear with greater frequency, whereas in the subsequent phases *UG* becomes more visible and assumes a more central role within the observed protest cycle, contributing to the salience of more explicitly disruptive practices. Figure 4 further specifies this differentiation by showing the distinct repertorial orientations of the three actors: *UG* clearly privileges practices associated with civil disobedience; *XR* adopts an almost balanced combination of demonstrative and civil disobedience actions; while *FFF* remains oriented almost entirely toward demonstrative practices, which account for approximately 90 percent of its overall distribution. This confirms that the observed changes concern not the radicalization of the movement as a whole, but the changing relative weight of actors characterized by different tactical profiles.

**Figure 3 – Actor’s presence over time**



Source: author’s own elaboration

**Figure 4 – Distribution of repertoire by actor**



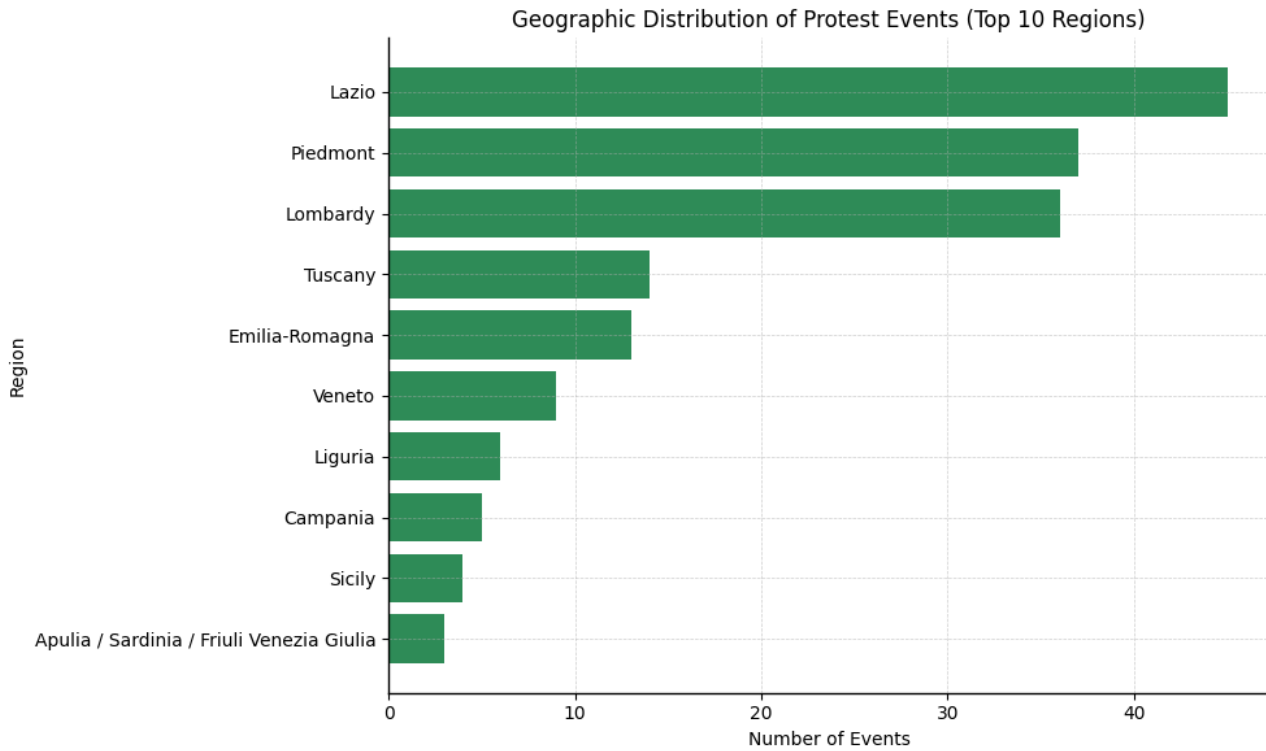
Source: author’s own elaboration

### 5.3 Geographic distribution

To complete the analytical picture, it is necessary to examine the spatial dimension of mobilization, that is, how climate protest has been distributed across the national territory. As della Porta and Diani (2015) emphasize, the choice of where to locate a collective action is never merely incidental but responds to communicative, symbolic, and strategic rationalities. The location of a protest event can be understood as a political decision aimed at enhancing visibility, exerting institutional pressure, and influencing public opinion.

As Figure 5 illustrates, the regions with the highest density of mobilization – particularly Lazio, Lombardy, and Piedmont – correspond to the country’s main political-institutional and media hubs: Rome, Milan, and Turin. This pattern is consistent with the strategic nature of locational choices, which often privilege urban contexts with high symbolic density.

**Figure 5 – Geographic distribution of protest event (top 10 regions)**



**Source:** author’s own elaboration

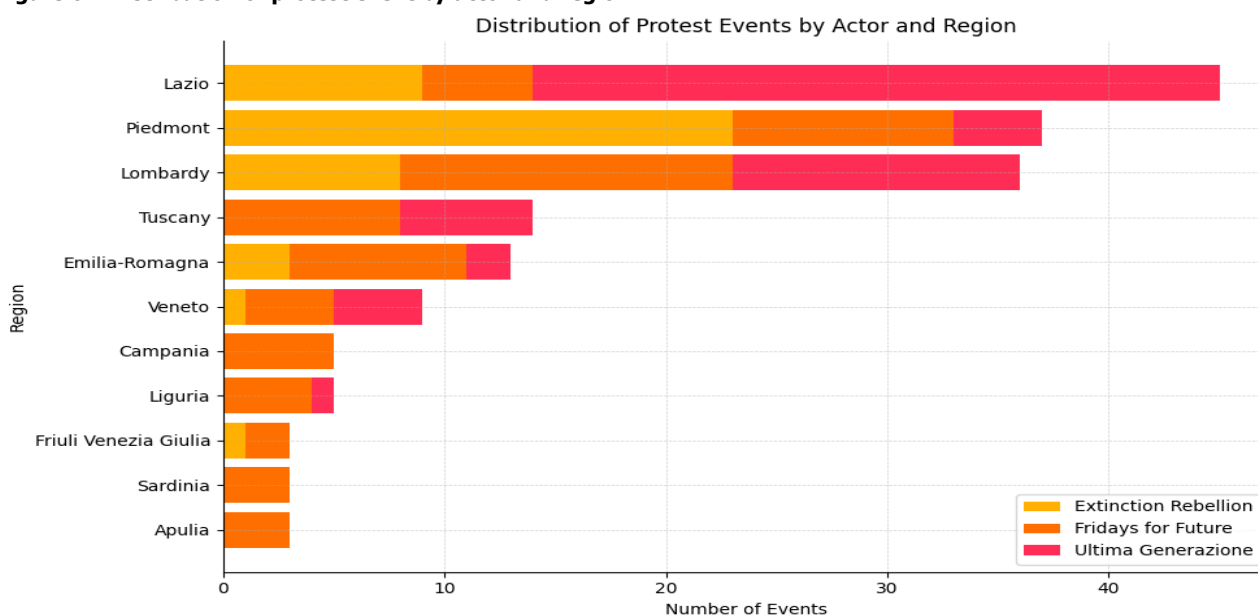
These areas host institutional headquarters, media outlets, cultural infrastructures, and corporate targets, functioning as “spatial devices” of public visibility and contention (Tilly 2000; Koopmans 2004; Nicholls *et al.* 2016). In the case of actions promoted by *UG*, the concentration in Lazio appears to follow a logic of dilemmatic civil disobedience aimed at targeting emblematic sites of state and cultural power – such as museums, ministries, courthouses, and central urban arteries (Sørensen and Martin 2014; Galiano 2025). In this sense, these spaces can be seen not merely as the material backdrop of protest, but as “actants” within the conflict, endowed with a semantic potential capable of amplifying the communicative effectiveness of the action.

By contrast, peripheral regions – particularly in Southern Italy – occupy a more marginal position within the geography of climate contention, delineating an uneven and centripetal spatial configuration of mobilization. Northern and Central Italy emerge as the principal poles of protest production, organizational consolidation, and public visibility, consistent with a well-established body of scholarship emphasizing the close relationship between mobilization capacity, organizational infrastructures, and institutional density (Tarrow 1990, 1994; Nicholls and Uitermark 2017). This territorial pattern, however, points beyond a mere uneven distribution of resources. More profoundly, it reflects a broader internal cleavage within contemporary environmentalism, whereby distinct forms of activism tend to crystallize within differentiated spatial settings,

shaped by specific political opportunities, socio-ecological grievances, and locally embedded infrastructures of collective action.

Climate-oriented mobilizations – such as those analysed in this study – tend to concentrate in large metropolitan areas of Northern and Central Italy, where dense institutional, media, and educational infrastructures may facilitate visibility, coordination, and diffusion. At the same time, other forms of environmental contention, more closely tied to local socio-ecological conflicts and territorial disputes, are more likely to emerge and consolidate in peripheral and rural contexts, where they draw on place-based grievances and localized networks of mobilization. From this perspective, the observed spatial asymmetry does not simply indicate an uneven distribution of protest, but rather suggests the coexistence of differentiated strands of environmentalism, structured along an urban-rural divide and grounded in distinct repertoires, scales of action, and conceptions of environmental issues.

**Figure 6 – Distribution of protest event by actor and region**



**Source:** author's own elaboration

Figure 6 further elucidates this configuration by illustrating locational differences across the three main actors analysed. Significant strategic divergences emerge. *UG* concentrates its actions primarily in Lazio, following a logic of maximum exposure and symbolic pressure on institutional and cultural power centres, resulting in a highly centralized spatial pattern. *XR*, by contrast, displays a more territorially anchored configuration, with a marked concentration in Piedmont, suggesting a strategy linked to specific local networks and infrastructures of mobilization. *FFF*, finally, presents a more articulated and spatially diffuse distribution, consistent with its nature as a generational and decentralized movement. Its presence is concentrated in regions with high urban density, strong university presence, and well-developed associational structures – such as Lombardy, Piedmont, and Tuscany – but extends also to other regional contexts, indicating a broader capacity for territorial diffusion.

Nonetheless, this configuration continues to display a marked concentration in northern and central contexts, underscoring the enduring relevance of a geographic gradient in mobilization capacity. At a deeper analytical level, this uneven spatial distribution reflects more than differential access to organizational resources or

varying degrees of institutional density; it also expresses the distinct spatial logics through which contemporary environmental contention is organized, differentiating metropolitan forms of climate activism – oriented toward visibility, symbolic disruption, and institutional targeting – from more territorially embedded forms of environmental mobilization, rooted in localized grievances, place-based identities, and situated ecologies of conflict.

## 6. Conclusions

This article offers a fine-grained empirical mapping of recent dynamics of climate contention in Italy, extending existing analyses of the latest season of mobilization through a systematic event-based approach covering the period 2022-2024. By integrating temporal, repertorial, and spatial dimensions, the study sheds light on the ways climate protest is articulated and reconfigured within a profoundly changing political–institutional context.

From a temporal perspective, the findings reveal the cyclical and discontinuous character of climate mobilization. In line with previous scholarship on the Italian case (Andretta and Imperatore 2023; Zamponi *et al.* 2024), protest unfolds through alternating sequences of expansion, intensification, contraction, and phases of latency. The most recent configuration of the cycle, however, displays distinctive features: lower levels of mobilization are accompanied by the progressive consolidation of civil disobedience as a signature protest associated with a specific actor within the field of mobilization, namely *UG*. This configuration highlights intertwined processes of deceleration, tactical innovation, intermittent suspension, and strategic recomposition, outlining a complex evolutionary trajectory that gives the latest phase a distinctive profile within the broader protest cycle.

The analysis of protest repertoires further refines this interpretation. Demonstrative practices retain a central position within the overall economy of mobilization; at the same time, the emergence of more disruptive forms of action – particularly civil disobedience – assumes an empirically circumscribed yet qualitatively significant role. Rather than indicating a cumulative dynamic of intensifying conflict, this pattern points to a situated reconfiguration of the repertoire, in which more contentious and symbolically radical forms of action temporarily acquire strategic centrality, selectively redefining action grammars, targets, and modes of public visibility. The comparison between *FFF*, *XR*, and *UG* reinforces this reading, showing how distinct tactical logics coexist within the same contentious field, align along lines of convergence and tension, and interact dynamically over time, producing shifts in strategic centrality and redefining, phase by phase, the internal configuration of climate mobilization.

The spatial dimension adds a further layer of interpretive complexity. The concentration of protest in major metropolitan areas confirms the strategic centrality of visibility, proximity to decision-making centres, and the high symbolic density that characterizes highly institutionalized urban spaces. At the same time, the asymmetrical territorial distribution of mobilization signals the coexistence of differentiated forms of environmental contention, organized along an urban-rural cleavage that cuts across the contemporary environmental field. Climate-oriented activism tends to take root in metropolitan contexts, where media, institutional, and organizational infrastructures favour visibility and diffusion of collective action; more place-based forms of environmental conflict, by contrast, tend to emerge in peripheral and rural settings, where mobilization is structured around territorially embedded grievances, local networks of activation, and specific ecologies of contention. What emerges is the image of an internally plural environmentalism, articulated through differentiated arenas of mobilization distinguished by scale, repertoire, and symbolic construction of environmental issues.

Taken together, these findings suggest interpreting recent climate mobilization in Italy as a specific wave of contention nested within a broader cycle of environmental contention. This wave displays a distinctive temporality, a differentiated composition of actors, phase-specific repertorial transformations, and a selective and uneven spatial diffusion. From this perspective, the Italian case confirms that protest cycles are shaped by the specific dynamics of the contentious waves that traverse them, each characterized by its own configuration of actors, claims, forms of action, and relational dynamics with the institutional and discursive environment (della Porta and Lavizzari 2022). The trajectory observed between 2022 and 2024 thus appears as the contingent evolution of a particular contentious wave, marked by peaks of tactical innovation, moments of selective radicalization, periods of low ebb, and processes of adaptive recomposition within a political arena increasingly shaped by regulatory constraints, shifting discursive environments, and redefined opportunities for mobilization.

Finally, the study opens several avenues for further research. A systematic investigation of the interactions between movements, state institutions, and media would allow for a more precise understanding of the mechanisms through which specific waves of contention take shape, attain public visibility, move through phases of intensification, and subsequently recombine into new contentious configurations. A further line of inquiry, grounded in a micro-cultural perspective, could explore the cognitive, emotional, and moral dynamics that structure both intra- and inter-movement interactions, as well as the narratives through which activists interpret the climate crisis and make sense of the responses articulated by institutions, movements, and citizens (Jasper 2018). More broadly, integrating event data with systematic analyses of activist strategies, institutional responses, and public reactions would make it possible to reconstruct more fully the relational mechanisms through which contentious waves emerge, transform, and sediment over time (Jasper and Duyvendak 2015), thereby offering a more sophisticated analytical framework for understanding the evolving trajectories of climate contention in contemporary Italy.

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## Appendix

**Table 1 – PEA dataset: Codebook and description**

<i>Varname</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Measurement</i>
ID	Identification number	Progressive number starting from 1
Date	Date of report	Range: 00/00/0000 – 00/00/0000
Descr	Description of the protest event in a row	String
Place 1	Place of the protest event (Region)	Nominal (ex. Lazio)
Place 2	Place of the protest event (Town)	Nominal (ex. Rome)
Nameorg	The names of the organizations staging the protest event	Nominal (ex. Extinction Rebellion)
XR	Was Extinction Rebellion among the organizers?	Dummy: 0=No; 1=Yes
UG	Was Ultima Generazione among the organizers?	Dummy: 0=No; 1=Yes
FFF	Was Fridays For Future among the organizers?	Dummy: 0=No; 1=Yes
Perf	The performance of action adopted during the protest event	Nominal (ex. Demonstration, march)
Reperf	The repertoire of action adopted during the protest event	Nominal (ex. Demonstrative)
NEWSP	Title of the newspaper reporting the protest event	Nominal (ex. La Repubblica)

**Source:** author's own elaboration

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