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### Italian politics

## Giorgia Meloni's media freedom problem

The government of Italy's rightwing prime minister is under fire for using legal action as a weapon against journalists

Amy Kazmin in Rome AUGUST 12 2024

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As a journalist with *Il Foglio* — Italy's liberal, free-market oriented newspaper — Luciano Capone never shied away from searing criticism of what he describes as the government's protectionist impulses and statist policies.

But a column in which he quipped that industry minister Adolfo Urso should be called Urss, the Italian acronym for the Soviet Union, landed Capone in the kind of legal trouble critics say has become too frequent under the rule of Prime Minister [Giorgia Meloni](#).

The journalist is now facing a long, expensive legal battle after Urso sued him for libel and demanded €250,000 in damages.

"It's a bit surreal and ridiculous," Capone told the Financial Times. "He is accusing me of delegitimising the government, but then he asks for money for himself."

Urso's umbrage — and his lawsuit — reflect the fraught relations between journalists and [Meloni's government](#), a stand-off that has also prompted Brussels to accuse Rome of using legal action to stifle media criticism.

Italy dropped five places in the global press freedom index compiled by Reporters Without Borders this year, to 46 out of 180 nations.

Journalists, media freedom watchdogs and lawyers say members of Meloni's right-wing coalition are thin-skinned and quick to sue over unflattering coverage. The government has also imposed restrictions on reporting about criminal proceedings.

"We can certainly say that this government has a more repressive attitude, and is less open to freedom of information," said Andrea Di Pietro, a Rome-based media lawyer. "This is a change that we have all perceived . . . They are less willing to accept criticism on a political level."



Luciano Capone faces a long and expensive legal battle © Riccardo Pittaluga

Věra Jourová, a vice-president of the European Commission, last month accused Meloni's government of "[intimidation](#)" by increasingly using lawsuits to undermine journalists' work and of [seeking to interfere politically](#) in state-owned, public broadcaster RAI.

Meloni snapped back at the commission for allegedly giving credence to "clumsy and specious attacks" from "professionals in disinformation and mystification", and accused various Italian newspapers of trying to "manipulate" Brussels.

"I don't think there is a rule in Italy that says if you have a journalist card, you can freely defame someone," Meloni told reporters.

Senator Lucio Malan, a member of Meloni's right-wing Brothers of Italy party, said there was precedent for the prime minister seeking recourse from the courts when aggrieved by criticism.

"There are plenty of cases of prime ministers who did it before," Malan said. "I understand that somebody may not like it. But it is no change from the past."

Italy's postwar constitution — adopted after the fall of Benito Mussolini's fascist dictatorship — guarantees citizens' right "to express their thoughts in speech, writing, or any other form of written communication".



Journalists in Turin demonstrate to defend press freedom © LaPresse/Alamy

Yet the country's penal code also includes a fascist-era criminal defamation law, which prescribes several years in prison and fines for damaging someone's reputation. Unlike in countries such as the UK, these offences can include insults as well as specific claims about a person.

Oxygen for Information, a Rome-based observatory, estimates more than 6,000 libel complaints are filed each year and less than 10 per cent result in convictions.

"There is a problem of incentives," said Capone, who was sued several years ago for defamation by a lawmaker of the populist Five Star Movement. The case was eventually dismissed.

"To make a complaint doesn't cost the politicians anything, and it costs a lot for those who receive it . . . Given the slow pace of justice in Italy, it hangs the sword of Damocles over a journalist's head and leaves it there for four or five years."

During her years in opposition, Meloni often sued critics for allegedly insulting her, and many of those cases — which she did not withdraw after becoming premier — have recently led to high-profile verdicts.

Meloni, who cut her political teeth in a neo-fascist youth movement, alarmed allies in Europe and beyond when she came to power in 2022. But she soon allayed those fears by forging strong ties with Brussels and Washington, even as the erosion of media freedom remained a concern.

Just weeks after Meloni took office, proceedings began in her 2020 defamation case against writer Roberto Saviano for calling her and far-right League leader Matteo Salvini “bastards” over their tough stance on migration. In October, Saviano was convicted and ordered to pay Meloni €1,000.

A freelance journalist was fined €5,000 last month over social media posts in 2021, when she mocked Meloni for her diminutive height.



Roberto Saviano, centre, leaves a court in Rome following a hearing in the defamation lawsuit brought by Giorgia Meloni © Filippo Monteforte/AFP/ Getty Images

Other cases loom, with Luciano Canfora, an 82-year-old history professor, due to stand trial in October for calling Meloni “a neo-Nazi in her soul”.

In Italy, judges typically disapprove of offensive language, media lawyer Di Pietro said, even if it is about a convicted criminal. When a journalist called a dead mafia hitman “a piece of shit”, he was fined €600, plus legal costs in 2020.

“Italian jurisprudence does not legitimise the freedom of insults,” Di Pietro said. “Sometimes defamation is not for what you say, but how you say it.”

Other members of Meloni's cabinet have also sought legal recourse against critics. Defence minister Guido Crosetto threatened to sue a newspaper over alleging he had a conflict of interest because of his past defence industry work.

Crosetto did not take the paper to court, but three of its journalists are under criminal investigation for allegedly receiving and publishing details of confidential documents, including the minister's tax return. If found guilty, they could face up to five years in prison.

Agriculture minister Francesco Lollobrigida, Meloni's brother-in-law, sued a Rome-based philosophy professor who described his comments about "ethnic replacement" of Italians by migrants as reminiscent of a "neo-Hitlerite governor". But Lollobrigida's complaint was dismissed by a judge in May.

Il Foglio journalist Capone said he sees Urso's defamation case as more of a nuisance than a threat, but still finds himself weighing every word he writes.

"It adds a little bit of pressure," Capone said. "Each time I write about the topics handled by the ministry, I wonder how to talk about them, what words to use."

*Additional reporting by Giuliana Ricozzi*

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