International Journal of Non-Profit Sector Empowerment

Vol 3, No 1 (2024)

International Journal of Non-Profit Sector Empowerment

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doi: 10.12681/npse.40679

International Journal of Non-Profit Sector Empowerment
Volume 3, Issue 1 (2024)

ISSN: 5786-2432, e-ISSN: 7344-9856
https://doi.org/10.12681/npse.40679

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Resistance to the Mafia: The Emergence and Role of an Autonomous Subgroup of Civil Society in Southern Italy

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Abstract
This study aims to highlight key aspects of the Italian civil society's involvement in the fight against the Mafia. It explores the existence of a distinctive subgroup of civil society in southern Italy, dedicated to combating the Mafia through both conventional and unconventional actions. Moreover, it investigates whether these groups form a separate segment of civil society with unique characteristics, and identifies the underlying causes of their emergence in the region. The research builds on existing studies of these groups and the area, as well as literature on social movements and civil society. The findings suggest that these groups constitute an autonomous subgroup of civil society, shaped by the problem of organized crime and the state's inadequate response.

Keywords: Italy, Civil Society, Social Capital, Anti-Mafia Movements

Introduction

Italy is a liberal democracy, achieving high scores both in the political rights index (36/40) and the civil liberties index (54/60). However, as noted by Freedom House (2023), there are persistent and significant regional inequalities present within the country. The nation is plagued by endemic issues related to organized crime and corruption, which serve as obstacles to the enhancement of social capital and economic development, particularly in the southern regions, while also posing a continuous threat to the rule of law in Italy (Freedom House, 2023). The Italian political system presents significant peculiarities that must always be taken into account when analyzing it. Its dense historical past, ideological polarization, the sharp contrast between the economically prosperous and industrialized North and the poorer, underdeveloped South, as well as the multiplicity of institutional and, primarily, extrainstitutional political actors, constitute some of these peculiarities (Mosca, 2013). The research questions that motivated this bibliographical inquiry are as follows: Is there a well-established, institutionalized, and functional civil society in Southern Italy? Where are its roots found? What is its

Mpozios, I. (2024). Resistance to the Mafia: The Emergence and Role of an Autonomous Subgroup of Civil Society in Southern Italy. *International Journal of Non-Profit Sector Empowerment*, *3*(1), e40679. https://doi.org/10.12681/npse.40679

form? And, if it exists, what is its impact in the region? The geographic specification was added to the question due to the association of the southern part of the country with the presence of extrainstitutional actors who behave violently, undermining the state and especially local society. These are the criminal groups based in specific areas that have been commonly referred to, both in everyday language and academic discourse, as the "Mafia."

The goal of this bibliographical research is to highlight and describe a subcategory of civil society, which is dedicated to combating criminal organizations and their tactics using both conventional and unconventional means. This subcategory primarily exists in Southern Italy, where the problem of the Mafia is particularly prevalent. Its presence in the region emerges from the need to resolve the Mafia issue in various parts of the South, an issue that, despite previous efforts, has not been effectively addressed by state interventions.

Our research begins with a clarification of the terms "civil society" and "social capital," which will serve as tools to study the relationships between local actors. It continues with the identification and analysis of the causes of the North-South divide that characterizes the country. We will then examine why the formation of a healthy civil society was not possible in certain regions of Southern Italy in the past, and how this led to the formation of a subcategory of civil society in the country that became engaged in the fight against organized crime and its practices. Finally, we will attempt, with empirical data, to depict the current situation in the region.

Civil Society and Social Capital

Civil society is a contested concept that has received distinct interpretations from various thinkers throughout history, some evaluative and others more neutral. A detailed analysis of its content and the debates surrounding it, though interesting, would not be particularly meaningful for our research. For the purposes of this study, we have chosen two overlapping definitions. The first is from the World Bank, according to which "*Civil society refers to a wide range of non-governmental and non-profit organizations that are active in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, political, cultural, religious, or philanthropic grounds. Civil society organizations include, for example, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local organizations, charitable organizations, professional associations, trade unions, religious groups, and foundations*" (World Bank, 2013).

The second definition is from Dimitris A. Sotiropoulos, who describes civil society as: "*the sum of associations (organizations, movements, and networks), which can have either formal, legally*

recognized, or informal (unofficial) forms, situated in the space between the state and the market, and a) either raise some claim against the state to do something (e.g., to establish a right) or to refrain from something (e.g., to avoid discriminatory treatment towards certain groups), or b) engage in activities not aimed at profit but to provide services, often complementing or substituting public services (e.g., networks of social solidarity)" (Sotiropoulos, 2017, p. 26). This highly descriptive and open-ended definition helps us focus on the study of civil society actors in southern Italy whose primary goal is the fight against the Mafia phenomenon, whether through claims made to the state or through more unconventional actions. In some cases, their establishment aims to fill gaps left by the state in providing services. For example, some NGOs engaged in the fight against the Mafia have taken on the task of protecting witnesses in Mafia-related crimes due to the ineffective intervention of the state (Cayli, 2013).

The second concept that requires clarification due to its multiple connotations is that of social capital. In our research, the concept of social capital is understood in its narrower sense, referring to the existence of both "horizontal" trust among citizens, meaning how much citizens trust those around them, and "vertical" trust, meaning trust in the institutional system. Numerous studies have shown the low level of trust citizens in southern Italy have towards institutions, particularly political parties. While more recent studies show a slight improvement compared to the past, the level of trust remains very low (EUROSPES, Summary Document Italy Report 2023).

The lack of trust in certain areas of Italy is linked both to recent and historical factors, according to R. Putnam, one of the foundational theorists of social capital. He famously argued that the presence of social capital was closely related to the efficient and effective functioning of institutions, and thus to the achievement or enhancement of a country's democracy (Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1993). The criticism leveled at Putnam's theory (Rothstein, 2001; Cohen, 1999; Tilly, 2011) was intense, multifaceted, and largely challenging to his conclusions. However, in conjunction with the debates and the critical analysis of his theory, we could conclude that, while no direct causal relationship exists, democracy does require a certain minimum level of trust. Therefore, the presence of social capital that permeates a well-structured civil society, as we have defined it, is a sign of a functional and democratic state, but it does not constitute the sole reason for its existence (Belloni, 2008).

As previously mentioned, our research focuses on Southern Italy, where criminal organizations operate largely as autonomous centers of power. The Sicilian Mafia, the 'Ndrangheta in Calabria, and the Camorra in Naples are the most notable examples of such organizations. Each of these groups has its own structure and way of functioning (Sciarrone, 2010). It is important to emphasize that although

their activity is particularly intense in the South of Italy, the phenomenon of the Mafia is not confined to this region; for many scholars, it is and continues to be a national problem (Calderoni, 2011).

It is, however, a reality confirmed by research that there is a significant gap between the North and the South of Italy. The South lags behind the North both economically and socially. Despite national and supranational efforts throughout history aimed at achieving economic and social convergence, there have been no significant levels of development, and stagnation continues to characterize the region. Supporting this view is the European Social Progress Index, which measures social development across all European regions. According to this index, Campania and Sicily ranked among the worst regions in the EU, while other southern Italian regions also ranked very low in terms of social development—something that does not apply to the central and especially northern regions of Italy (EU Regional Social Progress Index, 2024).

The North-South Divide and the Rise of the Mafia

As we mentioned earlier, our research focuses on a subcategory of civil society that can be found in Southern Italy, whose main goal is to resist the actions of criminal groups like the Mafia. Therefore, it seems useful to provide a quick analysis of the causes behind the North-South divide and the rise of the Mafia as an extra-institutional actor that interacts with both politics and society. The unification of Italy in 1861 revealed the structural weaknesses of the South. The inhabitants of the region were stigmatized by Northern Italians as poor, living according to outdated ways of life, afflicted by endemic corruption, and characterized by criminal subcultures that replaced weak state institutions. These endemic problems became even more evident with the rapid and significant industrial development of the North (Davis, 2015).

However, the roots of the divide are not to be traced solely in the unification, but rather in a much earlier historical context. As mentioned previously, the theory of Robert Putnam regarding the link between social capital and democratization has been heavily critiqued. However, within his theory, there is a convincing argument regarding the democratic and, by extension, the social gap between the North and South of Italy. According to Putnam, the significant divide between the two regions can be traced back to the medieval period and the interactions between political regimes and local societies. Specifically, Putnam argues that social capital, which we referred to earlier, was created in self-governing city-states such as Florence, Genoa, and Venice, which thrived during the medieval period and benefited from the spirit of the Renaissance. In these areas, there was room for the cultivation of values like trust and faith, which supported oligarchic institutions. On the other hand, in Southern Italy,

the authoritarian rule of the Norman kings in Naples and Sicily, combined with the intense feudal organization, promoted social relations based on patronage and clientelism (Fukuyama, 2014). Therefore, the main cause of the regional differentiation was primarily political, but over time, according to Putnam, this difference was perpetuated through cultural values embedded in social capital.

Over time, in the South, social relations took on a vertical structure. Many of the pathologies resulting from this form of social organization were accentuated with the strengthening of the regions in Italy during the 1970s. The introduction of new democratic institutional functions in the South, in combination with the pre-existing vertical structure of social relations, created strong feelings of distrust and normalized corruption and lawlessness in local societies. This, together with weak institutional structures, strengthened the role of extra-institutional actors (the Mafia), who mediated between citizens in the absence of functional institutions. It also fostered the phenomenon of an ill-conceived form of familialism (Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993; Sciarrone, 2010). This could, to some extent, provide an explanation for the heightened role of the family as a mechanism of social protection and upward mobility in Southern Italy today, as well as in other regions where vertical protective social relations were historically developed and consolidated (Lalioti, 2018). In simpler terms, the problems that the region's institutions were unable to solve were taken up by extra-institutional actors, including criminal organizations. In contrast, in the North, according to Putnam, the horizontal structure of relationships favored subsequent economic prosperity and more effective institutional functioning (Fukuyama, 2014).

There are various theories regarding the historical and social origins of the Mafia phenomenon. While such an analysis is of considerable interest, the present research does not aim to engage in a historical investigation of the phenomenon, but rather to analyze its role and function in Italy, especially in the Southern regions. For this reason, we have relied on the research of Gambetta regarding the presence and function of the Mafia in Southern Italy. Gambetta argues, through a somewhat economic approach to the phenomenon, that mafiosi acted as entrepreneurs who provided protection in exchange for a fee to safeguard individual property rights among members of society when the state was unable to ensure them. This protection stemmed from the use of violence or the threat of violence by these individuals and groups, which, according to the famous definition of Weber, constitutes the monopoly of violence by the state (Gambetta, 1993; Edward Muir, 1999). However, when actors other than the state also possess the ability to exercise violence, it leads to phenomena that are present in contemporary Italy, as confirmed by the annual report of Freedom House, which states that criminal groups "sell" security

to business owners in exchange for payment in order to protect them from the violence they themselves generate (Freedom House, 2023).

The Need for a Subcategory in the Italian Civil Society in the Fight Against the Mafia

The definitions of civil society that we presented above clarify that participants in it do not aim for personal gain, and most importantly, they raise demands from the state. But what happens when aspects of the state become entangled with organized crime groups that, through their actions, oppose both the state and society as a whole? The list of political and institutional scandals, and their connections with the Mafia, is long and dates back to the past. On January 17, 2023, Totò Cuffaro, former commissioner of the Sicilian Christian Democratic Party (DC) and former President of the Sicily region, who was sentenced to 7 years in prison for his involvement with the Mafia, launched an attack on a journalist from the national newspaper *La Repubblica*, according to the organization Civicus, which aims to study and evaluate civil society worldwide (Civicus Italian report, 2023). A few years earlier, in September 2012, the municipal council of Reggio, a city in the Calabria region, was dissolved due to Mafia infiltration, following a judicial investigation (Sergi, 2015). These are contemporary cases that highlight the problem of the intertwining of politics with organized crime in Italy, especially in the South, and they fit into the vast list we referred to earlier.

Political scientist Judith Chubb, who has extensively studied the Italian political scene, argues that southern elites, including criminal groups, in order to gain access to the levers of government and ensure freedom of action from local administrations, provided support to government majorities regardless of their program or ideological stance (Chubb, 1983). The interdependent relationships developed by the Italian Christian Democratic Party with the Mafia in the South are well-known. In exchange for mobilizing votes from mafiosos who controlled large labor forces, the Christian Democratic Party offered protection and the provision of public works to certain extralegal actors. The public works they took on, the public positions, and access to public committees resulting from this reciprocal arrangement, strengthened the Mafia's influence in the South, allowing it to affect political decisions and benefit from them (Schneider, 2018). Similarly, the political heir of the Christian Democratic Party after its dissolution, the party **Forza Italia** under the leadership of Silvio Berlusconi, was accused of collaborating with Mafia circles (ibid).

The case of Giulio Andreotti, who was one of the most emblematic figures of the Christian Democratic Party, served as Italy's Prime Minister three times, and was accused (and acquitted due to statute of

limitations) during the "Clean Hands" operation for his involvement with the Sicilian Mafia, essentially represents the scope of the problem. This operation also exposed cases of corruption and Mafia collusion involving politicians from left-wing parties. It is also known that the Mafia supported the Communist Party during certain election periods, especially when, in the 1980s, the Christian Democratic Party resisted Mafia pressures and tightened anti-crime legislation (ibid). These examples support Chubb's view that the Mafia does not adhere to any particular ideology, but instead holds an opportunistic stance aimed at increasing its influence. Equally revealing are the words of Piero Grasso, the former anti-Mafia prosecutor, in an interview on the show "War Zone" hosted by journalist Sotiris Danezis in 2004, where he said: “In every election cycle, the Mafia does not have a political color, it does not have an ideology; it always bets on whoever will come to power because it wants to be a part of managing a portion of the power.”

These points are of particular importance for our research because we will see later that the calls of the anti-Mafia movement from the 1990s onwards appear to be depoliticized and reject political affiliations. This is a result of society's distrust and anger toward the entire political system (Ruzza, 2010). These social sentiments emerged from the revelation of political scandals involving corruption and collusion with the Mafia by politicians and state actors, particularly after 1992 and the "Clean Hands" operation, which was the main cause for the collapse of the so-called "First Republic" and the dissolution of many political parties. These parties, which tried to dominate rather than govern society, were driven by oligopolistic and paternalistic approaches to action (Fabbrini, 2009, p. 33).

The above helps us understand the relationship between the Mafia and the political-administrative system, both at the national and regional levels. However, to understand the movement-based form of civil society in Southern Italy, we must describe how it infiltrates local communities where it carries out its activities. Beyond the reciprocal relationship it maintains with parts of the political system, the Mafia has developed connections based on violence or the threat of violence with the business world, significantly influencing local economies. These ties are primarily based on extortion and intimidation (Calderoni, 2011). One of the key tactics the Mafia uses in its interaction with local businesses is known as "Pizzo". Literally, the word describes a small bird dipping its beak in water, but in Southern Italy, it metaphorically refers to the money organized crime groups demand from local entrepreneurs in areas within their criminal domain, as a form of extortion. The proceeds from this practice are used, among other things, to maintain the families of imprisoned mafiosi and cover their legal expenses. Failure to pay can lead to vandalism, arson, or even murder, as has often occurred in the past. It is also important to note that all the criminal tactics we described in Southern Italy are encapsulated by the

"Omertà" the law of silence that these groups enforce on both their members and their victims. Violating this code results in various consequences (Forno & Gunnurson, 2010).

Dealing with this tactic has proven to be a very difficult task, and according to Freedom House, it continues to this day. The control criminal groups have over various areas of Italy, combined with their political and administrative influence, forces business owners to cooperate by submitting to extortion. Those who refuse often adopt exit strategies, moving their businesses to other, safer areas, which damages local entrepreneurship (Sciarrone, 2010). In this way, resistance to the "Pizzo" tactic becomes a collective action problem, as described by Mancur Olson. Olson argues that no individual has an incentive to act in a way that would benefit everyone, which is evident in various aspects of everyday life (Lowndes, Marsh & Stoker, 2020).

The same seems to be happening in Southern Italy. Business owners, uncertain about the reactions of other entrepreneurs to the Mafia, fear taking action and bearing the full burden of their actions due to the lack of coordination and collective resistance to the aforementioned practice (Sergi, 2015). Especially after the assassination of Libero Grassi in 1991, who was murdered outside his home in Palermo for stubbornly refusing to comply with the "Pizzo" and publicly exposed the problem through an article in a local newspaper (Forno & Gunnurson, 2010). According to Olson, people must take action that has a personal cost to secure a benefit for the group they belong to (Lowndes, Marsh & Stoker, 2020). The majority of business owners do not appear to be willing to take on a share of the cost and continue to align themselves with the illegal activities of criminal groups. According to Olson’s theory, due to the inability to coordinate collective action, business owners act rationally in this way because they are distrustful that others will join in resisting the payment of the "Pizzo" and thus, they would bear the entire burden of opposing already deeply entrenched criminal groups in local communities. However, this rational individual action to submit to extortion in order to continue running their businesses harms the collective in multiple ways and creates an atmosphere of collective discontent (Sciarrone, 2010).

It is important to note that Olson’s theory was developed in an era before the internet and the tools it provides for people with similar problems and interests to meet and organize (Hague, Harrop & McCormick, 2020). Therefore, in the early 2000s, with the use of new communication technologies, a movement emerged with the main goal of combating the phenomenon of extortion and intimidation of entrepreneurs by criminal organizations for profit, which, as mentioned earlier, is encapsulated in the concept of the "Pizzo."

The name of the movement is "Antiopizzo," and it symbolizes the desire to abandon this practice that traps many Southern regions in stagnation. The movement is based in Palermo and was started by seven young people, prompted by a discussion about their potential involvement in the local business community, specifically opening a local pub together. Their concern was not about finding a place or money, but how they would deal with the illegal demands imposed by the Mafia on most local business owners. The non-legal and, more importantly, the moral obligation to submit to such extortion prompted them to take action against it. One evening, they posted stickers around Palermo with the following message: "A people who pays the Pizzo is a people without dignity." The movement's main tool is the promotion of selective consumption based on conscious consumers (Forno & Gunnurson, 2010). It encourages consumers to choose stores whose owners refuse to submit to the "Pizzo" or have reported it when asked. Consumers know which businesses resist by finding the movement's stickers on the windows, which are placed there by the business owners themselves (Forno & Gunnurson, 2010).

The goals of the movement, according to its manifesto, are to achieve a change in the local culture regarding lawlessness and to foster social change that will be centered around a collective mindset of the rule of law. Today, the movement reports that its participants number 13,497, with 971 businesses in the Sicily region actively resisting Mafia involvement. Furthermore, the movement itself has assisted over 270 victims of violent tactics employed by criminal groups (Antiopizzo, 2024). This data comes from the official website of the organization. The very existence and activities of the movement, which is one of many non-governmental organizations engaged in the fight against the Mafia, highlights the uniqueness of a part of civil society that has developed due to the presence of the corresponding problem, namely the existence of well-established criminal groups interacting both with society and the state. This interaction is marked by intense conflict. Notable examples of this conflictual situation include the murders of judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino by the Sicilian Mafia during their efforts to prosecute and imprison Mafia members with proven criminal activity and their connections to politicians (Calderoni, 2011). Within this conflictual climate, activist groups emerge, taking on the role of contentious political actors (Tilly & Tarrow, 2017).

From Individual Activist Actions to Collective Resistance

Before 1990, aside from state actions against organized crime, such as the creation of the Anti-Mafia Commission in 1962 and its activities, or the 1982 legislation that separated the Mafia from other types of criminal groups and defined its characteristics, society reacted to the violence of organized crime groups through individual activist actions or collective responses following incidents of intense

violence attributed to the Mafia (Cayli, 2013, p. 83). We have already mentioned the case of Libero Grassi, the businessman who was murdered in Palermo in 1991 for refusing to bow to Mafia extortion. The earliest case of individual opposition to the Mafia was that of Peppino Impastato, who came from a Mafia family, with members of his family being significant figures in the criminal organization in Sicily. He opposed the actions, practices, and values that underpinned the Mafia by creating a radio program called "Onda Pazza," through which he publicly criticized its activities, leading to his murder in 1978. His murder was followed by a wave of protest, although it did not gain mass momentum. In the 1980s, there was a mobilization by students and educators with the primary goal of spreading and developing the values of democracy and civil society, which rejected political parties and aimed directly at raising public awareness (Schneider & Schneider, 2001).

A pivotal moment in the transformation of the anti-Mafia movement came in the 1990s, particularly with the violent murders of judges Falcone and Borsellino by the Sicilian Mafia. These events generated a strong outcry within society, which was reflected in the "Committee of Sheets" movement. The citizens of Palermo, in order to express their opposition to the Sicilian Mafia, hung sheets from their balconies. Anyone who did not follow this practice immediately became suspected of being connected to the Mafia (Weissman, 1999). Intense collective mobilizations led to the implementation of strict measures by the state and the creation of many autonomous organizations that took on the battle against the Mafia in a more coherent and organized manner.

Perhaps the most well-known and influential of these is the organization "Libera," which was founded in 1995 and has since played a leading role in the anti-Mafia movement, becoming the largest organization in this field. It maintains relationships with similar organizations both within Italy and internationally, as well as with schools, through which it seeks to educate younger generations on the issue and cultivate values that oppose those espoused by organized crime in southern Italy (Cayli, 2013). Its primary goal is the creation and coordination of social activities that will condemn the Mafia and encourage the formation of local volunteer groups and other initiatives as alternatives to Mafia influence. Its activity began immediately after its founding, and its first successful action was the collection of one million signatures for a legislative act from the state that would allow the reuse of confiscated Mafia assets for the collective good. In 2009, Libera was awarded by the European Economic and Social Committee for its work, which continues to this day.

Since the 1990s, the anti-Mafia movement has become more active with targeted actions. One reason, as mentioned earlier, was the violent murders of judges Falcone and Borsellino, who heroically tried to root out organized crime from southern Italy. Their work did not end with their murders; they

became symbols and continue to inspire many of the activists who have joined the civil society movements against organized crime (Cayli, 2013). Additionally, the "Clean Hands" operation, during which over 3,000 politicians and public administration members were convicted of corruption between 1992 and 2003, influenced the form and foundation of the anti-Mafia movement. Distrust of politics provided the motivation for more unconventional forms of action, such as those of Libera and Antiopizzo, while emphasis was placed on changing the criminal culture by fostering values that would lead to the establishment of a mindset of legality in the southern regions (Lawson, 2000).

The Contemporary Aspect of Italian Civil Society Opposing the Mafia

In the last two decades, there has been a significant increase in the creation of organizations within civil society aimed at combating the Mafia (Cayli, 2012). The entities involved in non-governmental organizations and networks such as Libera seem to distinguish themselves through a new understanding of the stance they must adopt toward organized crime. Distrust toward politics has led them to adopt dynamic methods of advocating their demands and to create a new identity that sets them apart from the rest of society, based on post-materialistic and cultural values and beliefs. Their collective identity is framed around the values of democracy and resistance to the fear instilled by the violent actions of the Mafia, while their main goal is no longer just to pressure the state to eradicate the Mafia but also to communicate directly with local communities (Della Porta, 2010). Another noteworthy characteristic of these civil society organizations is the significant involvement of young people, who act in unconventional political ways with primarily post-materialistic motivations, aiming for social and value-based change. This is a characteristic of political participation by young people in recent decades, with a notable example being the formation of the previously mentioned Antiopizzo movement, created by young people in Palermo with the goal of changing the local culture (Sveningsson, 2015; Forno & Gunnurson, 2010).

We are referring to active citizens from southern Italy who form activist groups, having emerged within a conflictual framework that involves violence and acting as political subjects advocating for social and political change (Tilly & Tarrow, 2017). The research by Baris Cayli, conducted in 2013, aimed at studying the perspective of non-governmental organizations involved in the fight against the Mafia, sheds light on both the state's and the organizations' stance toward criminal groups. The conclusions of this research reveal that these civil society organizations fighting the Mafia consider state intervention inadequate and disagree with the style and focus of the policies advanced by the state to address the problem. They also emphasize the need to improve their own actions and collectively advocate for the most effective and meaningful policy and action, which they see as the creation of a

culture of legality and the cultivation of values within the local community that oppose those espoused by organized crime (Cayli, 2013).

However, it should not be assumed from the above that civil society in southern Italy functions smoothly and has successfully tackled the problem. After all, the scandal revealed in 2014, known in Italy as "Mafia Capitale," in which many NGOs were involved in corrupt relationships with political parties and organized crime groups, deeply impacted public trust in these organizations and debunked much of their activity. Following the revelation of the scandal, processes were initiated to tighten and regulate the operation of Italian NGOs, due to public pressure (Carolei, 2020). This issue concerns the entire civil society and the organizations representing it in Italy. Our research, however, as previously mentioned, focuses on one aspect of civil society that opposes the organized crime groups that plague the country, particularly the southern regions. Even in this case, their actions face obstacles. The anti-Mafia movement, beyond some isolated and spontaneous collective mobilizations, has not gained mass support despite its continuous appeals (Cayli, 2012). Its activities are limited to activist actions that, while cohesive and institutionalized, are not sufficient to eradicate the Mafia problem from local communities.

This does not diminish the effectiveness of their actions, as international organizations praise their contribution to fighting the phenomenon. A notable reference is made in the Global Organized Crime Index for Italy, which highlights the scale of organized crime in the country and the importance of the local civil society in combating it. Specifically, it states: "*Civil society organizations are vital in addressing Mafia extortion, supporting local businesses, and mediating between victims and law enforcement authorities*" (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023). This complements what we have previously mentioned about the activist movements and organizations that make up the distinctive civil society in Italy, which is at the forefront of the battle against the Mafia.

Conclusions

The aim of this research was to highlight the existence and activities of a subcategory of Italian civil society, which is primarily focused on combating the Mafia and its practices. The separation of this segment from the broader Italian civil society—which includes chambers of commerce, trade unions, movements, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) responsible for migrant protection, and many other associations active in the country—was made in order to provide a more thorough analysis of the cause that shapes and defines it. Italy has long experienced intense and numerous civic actions and mobilizations for social issues. It is generally a country where social protest and action are integral

parts of its political and social life (Mosca, 2013). However, this particular aspect of civil society has been formed and continues to evolve due to a unique problem affecting Italy, particularly its southern regions—the presence and activity of powerful organized crime groups that often interlock with both politics and society. The actions of such groups are a national issue, but their effects are particularly evident in the southern regions of the country where they are based. Southern Italy contains some of the most deprived areas of the European Union, and one of the main reasons for the stagnation and underdevelopment in these regions is the damaging activities of these groups, which undermine administrative and political structures, local businesses, and social trust (EU Regional Social Progress Index, 2024).

In our research, we focus on this part of civil society because, unlike in the past, when actions against the Mafia came from isolated individuals either as reactions to its tactics or through activism and targeted action, modern resistance to the Mafia, especially after 1990 and reaching a peak in the 2000s, comes from multiple and more institutionalized channels. The number of groups currently active against the Mafia and its practices is high, and their range of activities shows significant variety. In our research, we highlighted only a few examples of organizations involved in the fight against the Mafia, but many others exist, all seeking social change and the eradication of the phenomenon. Despite the variety of their methods, there is a point of significant convergence among all these organizations, which relates to the demand for a change in local culture with a central focus on legality and the cultivation of values opposed to those upheld by organized crime groups. Despite their notable efforts to combat Mafia practices, Italy currently ranks third-worst in the European Union in terms of organized crime and is the worst in Southern Europe. Organized crime groups, despite a reduction in the violence they employ, continue their criminal and illegal activities, which include money laundering, drug trafficking, extortion, and more, while their attempts to infiltrate political and administrative structures are frequent and often successful (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023).

The groups we refer to form a distinct aspect of Italian civil society with a targeted role in combating organized crime. This perhaps demonstrates that civil society, as we defined it at the beginning of our research, is influenced by the existing social structures within a state and adapts its organization and actions to these, filling gaps that may be left by the state. The conflictual context in which these groups were formed and influenced has given this part of Italian civil society an activist approach, as shown by the actions of some of the groups that characterize it, and has transformed the entities forming it into politically engaged subjects. These subjects, beyond their demands towards the state, also operate autonomously within the legal framework, advocating for the weakening of organized crime and the

establishment of a culture of legality. This culture is seen as central to the fight against the Mafia, as it appears to have deep roots in the local society. Therefore, its eradication may require coordinated actions coming from both civil society and the state.

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